A Destiny Altered Chp 1

A Destiny Altered
Always in motion, the future is, the past, impossible to change. Be mindful of the present
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Anakin Solo knew he was in trouble, knew that Myrkr would most likely be his grave. His insides burned with every breath he took. The stitches applied by Tekli, tearing once more as he rushed to help a fallen member of his team. He clenched his fist as he struggled to maintain control of both the dwindling members of the strike force and his own pain. With nearly half his team dead, the voxyn queen still beyond their reach, and an entire battalion of Yuuzhan Vong warriors surrounding them, he could list on one hand the number of positive things about the mission. Namely, the fact that his siblings were alive, Tahiri was still alive, as was Lowie, and Tenel Ka.
For now, he thought morbidly.
The entire mission was fast turning out to be a disaster. Scratch that, it started out as a disaster and had now degraded into whatever was worse.
Then again, he mused, oblivious to the explosion caused by a nearby Yuuzhan Vong magma spitter, the analysts *had* predicted a not so favorable success rate to begin with. With statistics such as a ninety percent casualty rate and a less than fifty percent success rate…it was hard not to get rid of his 'negatude'. The fact that a member of his team had given her life just to make the success rate as high as it was left a bitter taste in his mouth.
Whatever possessed him to think that he could pull this off? Though he didn't see eye to eye with his older brother, Jacen, it was times like this when Anakin wondered if Jacen had been right all along.
Another explosion, and the ground shook. His own ragged breathing loud to his ears.
Not so favorable odds indeed. Where was a Corellian when you needed one?
Through the Force-Meld he felt a surge of panic and quickly spun around towards the source. Despite the flare of pain that erupted from the action, the sight of Tahiri flying through the air from a magma blast temporarily numbed his mind. By the time he managed to shake himself and start towards her, she was already up and heading towards them.
"Magma spitters! We're cut off."

He could feel her concern for him, but they both knew little could be done. "Tekli?"
He followed Tahiri's gesture, and swallowed. Another member of his strike team was down. There was no way he would lose any more people. Not while he was the leader.
"Take him…" Anakin inhaled sharply, a hand instinctively reaching for his wound, but his other motioned towards the unconscious Barabel. "Take him and go. You may need to cut your way out."
Anakin immediately felt a wave of incredulity and disbelief at his words. "'You'? I'm not going—"
"Do it!" Anakin almost snarled, the combination of the pain in his side and the stress of the situation making him sound more forceful than he actually intended. "You need…to help Tekli. I'll be along."
Another flare of agony drowned out whatever Tekli was saying, but from Tahiri's reaction, the Chadra-Fan seemed to realize what he had planned. He saw a tear threaten to leave Tahiri's eye, and tried to smile reassuringly. In his state, he didn't trust what might leak through if he tried to comfort her through the Force. Not that he ever had much success in hiding his feelings from her anyways.
Tahiri's knowing, stricken gaze nearly made him change his mind, and he reflexively bent down as she stretched up to kiss him. But just before their lips met, she suddenly pulled back and started to shake her head. As she opened her mouth to speak, a massive explosion nearby caused the ground beneath them to tremble violently. Whether or not that was the cause, she staggered into Anakin.
She barely had time to register his arms around her when she suddenly realized that she was kissing him. Or rather, he was kissing her. The wordless cry of surprise died on her lips as she simply closed her eyes and returned the kiss with everything she had.
Anakin felt Tahiri relax against him, molding herself to his body as he temporarily let all of his barriers drop. He knew that this would be the last chance they would have together. His dying would hurt her, yes, but at the same time, he would be saving her and everyone else.
Yet, he couldn't ignore the turmoil within himself as he held her in his arms. As if sensing it, Tahiri only pressed herself harder against him, her hands reaching up to hold his face as they had done during their first kiss. Their Force bond flared in the meld, feelings intense, raw, uninhibited by the chaos around them.
The other Force-sensitives in the region felt only heart-wrenching pain for the two, realizing what could have been, and knowing what was going to be.

Anakin had no idea how long the kiss lasted. It felt like an eternity to him, and he was grateful to the Force for giving him this one last opportunity. He focused on her, on his feelings for the smaller teen in his arms, the feel of her dry lips pressed against his. The way she fit so perfectly against him. The warmth of her body through the, thin, singed clothing they both wore. He reached a hand up to caress her check, his heart thudding loudly in his chest. It was then that realization struck him like blaster fire.

He truly loved her. He truly did. Be it as both a best friend and something much more. With that epiphany, he renewed his resolve. He would give anything, even his life, to see that she made it off this planet. He closed his own eyes, suddenly regretting that the Force was going to separate them so soon. So soon, when they still had so much to discover with each other.

Slowly, they parted, Tahiri's eyes half-lidded as she gazed up at him. One of her hands still cupped his cheek, while a single tear escaped, unchecked, down her cheek. "You have to come back, Anakin. I….I… just come back."

Anakin offered the best Solo-smile he could manage, her own feelings pulsating loudly in the Force. "I'll see you soon, then, yeah?"

"Yeah," Tahiri repeated hoarsely, letting her hand fall to her side as she stepped back. "May the Force be with you."

Committing every detail of the beautiful young woman in front of him to memory, Anakin nodded and took a step back as well. Before his strength completely failed him, he turned away and limped towards the doorway. From the magma spitters to the hoard of warriors swarming the area, Anakin briefly wondered if the Force had a sense of humor. His first kiss was on an airless space-station, and his last was in a crumbling grotto on a war-torn, Sith-incarnate planet. Behind him, he could feel Tahiri smile sadly and knew that their minds were linked. Closing his eyes, he gently nudged her out of his head, least he lose his resolve. What he had planned was becoming a lot harder to commit to. Yet, he sighed, he had to do it or everyone would die. And they would die because he had tried to be someone he wasn't, a hero. Exhaling shakily and not looking back, Anakin began to run the fastest he could manage.

His lambent pulsed, informing him of a warrior to his left. Anakin ducked under the amphistaff, tearing the last of his stitches as he did. The warrior renewed his attack, only to promptly lose both arms, then its head. A magma missile erupted behind him, spraying the air with superheated debris.

Anakin continued forward.

Another warrior, more pain as the butt of an amphistaff slammed into his side. Anakin just barely managed to raise his blaster in time, dropping the warrior a split second before a follow-up attack would have skewered him. Rising, Anakin vomited up blood, giving thanks to both his siblings as he felt them reach out and reinforce his failing strength.

The rest of the battle passed him in a dizzying blur. He vaguely recalled shouting about an imposter, with the hope that the others had heard him, but even that seemed like a long while ago. Warriors were pouring in from everywhere, and Anakin could do little to stem the tide.

Slash

Leap

Blaster fire

The burn of amphistaff venom

He sliced into one warrior, dodging another. His blaster was knocked from his hand after ending the life of a heavily-scarred squad leader. An amphistaff scored another hit, but he didn't feel it. The Force was now coursing through his body like never before.

He could hear his sister scream his name, see the voxyn queen escaping. He could do little but call out through the Force. Another amphistaff pierced him, and Anakin felled another warrior.

A longblaster sounded.

His heart beat loudly in his ears.

More Yuuzhan Vong surrounded him. He had to get clear. Had to clear the way for the others. His body continued to burn with the Force, a glowing nimbus in the flaming battlefield.

He could see the tissue sample Nom Anor was trying to salvage. Heartbeats….his brother and sisters crying as they looked on with wide eyes.

The roar of a warrior as the scarred fighter scored another hit on the infamous *Jeedai*.

Distant screams, yells, deafening roar of a blaster.

Go now!

Anakin held up the detonator in his hand so the others could see it. *Thirty seconds.*The whine of the detonator as he armed it was oddly loud as the Force whipped around him. *Take her Jacen. Tell Tahiri I love her.*

"Tell me yourself, you big, stupid gundark!"

Anakin's blue eyes widened at the sound of her voice and looked over his shoulder. Tahiri was there, behind him, her green eyes chlorine ice as she focused on the warriors in front of her. She was, however, not

without wounds of her own. In fact, the Force was likewise swirling around her, streaming from the various amphistaff-inflicted injuries on her body. The detonator in his hand began to count down.
"Well? Throw it, or do you want to blow the both of us up?" Tahiri yelled, slipping beneath three amphistaffs and jamming her blue saber under the armor of one of the assailants. Seeing Anakin's stunned expression, Tahiri rolled her eyes and held out her own hand. The Force sent the about-to-detonate explosive flying from his grip and into the middle of the voxyn tissue samples. Nom Anor dove out of the way, and a split second later, the detonator went off.
The explosion rippled in the background, framing the golden-haired teen. Tahiri offered him a faint grin as another amphistaff scored a hit, her body fast reaching its own burnout point. *You don't let a girl know you love her and expect her to just watch you die afterwards.*
Anakin closed his eyes, a myriad of emotions rushing through him. When they shared that kiss, their barriers had been down completely. Neither had any secrets from each other, each could see what the other was thinking. His feelings for her had been at the forefront of his thoughts, and she no doubt felt every iota. She must have wracked both their brains for some way to save him, to help him. When no way presented itself, she decided to choose the next best option. Anakin opened his eyes and managed a faint, sad smile. *Together then, huh? Of course together, how else?* Tahiri sent back, the glow of Force energy slowly consuming her as well.
The two closed their eyes and their bond, now no longer restricted by the confines of their bodies, ignited in a blinding brilliance. A wave of Force erupted out from the two of them, leveling the warriors closest to them, and the two became whirling dealers of death. Their very life-forces seem to merge, neither weaker than the other. Memories of when they were children flashed through their minds, plummeting from great heights but each trusting the other to slow their own fall.
Just as they had done so on Yavin Four, on Yavin Eight, on Tatooine, and on Vjun, the two fought at the other's side. Bodies piled up around them, their feet gliding across the blood-slickened ground, their own wounds no longer registering. Time stretched on and on. Still they fought.
Together. The word echoed in the Force for all to hear. Both were in complete sync with the other, blue and purple blades slicing away the darkness around them.
Long when their individual presences in the Force should have gone out, the two swirled around. The Force burning away amphistaff venom, repairing wounds, enhancing their every movement. They

jointly held out their hands, and a wave of Force energy ripped the ground apart beneath the feet of their attackers. Another gesture and handfuls of warriors were sent flying high into the air. The two were glowing, their faces showing nothing but peaceful acceptance as they fought for those they cared for.
Together, they were stronger than the sum of their parts.
Even then, the power they wielded was not infinite. The glow around the two began to dissipate, but still they moved. Together, protecting the other as best as their dying bodies would let them. Panting heavily, they both exchanged one last wry grin.
Any regrets, Solo?
Only that we didn't have longer
Can't have everything
True, doesn't hurt to wish though
The two forced the last of their energies into their tired arms and raised their lightsabers once more. The glow of the flames behind them kept their blood-splattered, weary forms illuminated. The two were a frightening sight to those who viewed them. The Force had healed their wounds as they had received them, leaving them bloodied, but unblemished as they stood atop a mountain of dead warriors, staring down those still remaining. The warriors below seemed almost afraid to approach, as if they were in the presence of a greater power. With a crackling laughter, Tahiri called out to these warriors goadingly.
"*Tchurokk! Nikk'o Yun-Ne'Shel kash Yun-Shuno, tor'dak prat yam kalhnaz tur zhaelor."*
Behold, we are Yun-Ne'Shel and Yun-Shuno, attack us if you deny this truth.
Initially, the warriors all stared up at the glowing Jedi, waiting for someone else to make the first move. But as Anakin and Tahiri's presence in the Force gradually disappeared, so too did the golden nimbus that surrounded them. Their strength leaving them, the two began to sag. The slight slump in the two Jedi's posture was all the warriors needed. With a victorious battle cry, they charged up the mountain of their dead comrades.
A longblaster screeched, and the first warrior up the pile tumbled back downwards, headless. More blaster fire followed, quickly accompanied by a flying blade of vibrant light. The thrown lightsaber buried itself in the skull of a heavily scarred warrior, before flying back to its owner. As one, the Yuuzhan Vong whirled to face the new threat. As one, they were promptly cut down.
Anakin watched with an odd detachment as his sister, tears streaming from her eyes, recklessly charged into the outstretched amphistaffs.

Her intention shone brightly in the Force, she was *not* going to lose her little brother.
Zekk was right behind her, obviously having chased after her just to keep *her* from being killed. Tenel Ka, Tesar Sebatyne, Alema Rar, Lowbacca all plunged into the fray only a split second later, routing what was left of the already stunned Yuuzhan Vong warriors. What had been a skillfully planned ambushed quickly devolved into a free-for-all brawl. And through it all, Anakin looked on, impassively. It wasn't that he didn't care, it was just that he could feel the Force tugging on both himself and Tahiri, urging them to leave their bodies. Both were now lying on the top of the mountain of corpses, their vision swimming as they heard and saw everything through a heavy veil of darkness.
Then, new strength coursed through both himself and Tahiri. The team's Chadra-Fan healer was crouched between both his own fallen form and Tahiri's, her hands working at rapid speeds, her Force presence infusing them as she worked.
"I need more assistance!" Tekli called out. "I can repair what's left of the damage to their bodies, but they're rapidly becoming one with the Force!"
A curse. Anakin saw Zekk cover Jaina as she leaped to the top of the pile of bodies. His eyes fluttered close. His sister's heavy breathing was oddly loud to his ears. Why was she still here when he had told her to go? Hadn't anyone listened to him?
Anxiously, Jaina crouched down next to the healer. "What do I need to do?"
"Send your strength into either Anakin or Tahiri," Tekli said quickly, sewing up another wound. "Their bond is using whatever energy they receive to keep *both* of them alive, and because of that, they need twice the energy to stay living. I simply don't have enough."
A razor bug hissed through the air, but the snap hiss of Jaina's lightsaber vaporized it before it made impact.
"Zekk!"
"Sorry, that one got by me!"
Tears still flowing unchecked, Jaina knelt between to two fallen Jedi. Tightly gripping one of Anakin's icy cold hands in one hand, and one of Tahiri's blood-crusted hands in the other, Jaina began to pour everything she had into their fading life forces. She wouldn't fail them. She couldn't. Panting fearfully, she tuned out the world around her, trying to will Anakin and Tahiri back to health.
As if responding to her resolve, they both stirred.
"Jaina?" Anakin murmured, confused.

"I'm not losing you, little brother," Jaina whispered hoarsely looking onto the two. "And don't think you're not important either, Tahiri. The both of you have to live…please. I *need* both of you to live."
As she said those words, a small light shone from both Anakin and Tahiri. Their chests began to resume a normal rise and fall pattern, and their hands reflexively squeezed Jaina's in turn.
"The queen?" Anakin murmured.
Jaina rolled her eyes. "Always about the mission. That's what got you into this state in the first place, idiot. Jacen and Ganner are on it, now shut up and let Tekli and I heal the two of you."
Anakin weakly nodded, then, to Jaina's alarm, his eyes fluttered shut and his Force presence dimmed considerably. Seconds later, Tahiri's presence followed.
"Anakin? Tahiri?" Jaina whispered in wide-eyed panic. She ignored the beads of sweat that rolled down her forehead as she tightly grasped both Tahiri and Anakin's hands and began to call on whatever strength she had in reserve. "Come on! Don't do this to me! Don't do this, you two!"
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The holographic projections of Borleias, complete with possible hyperspace routes to and from the Yuuzhan Vong staging ground, and Coruscant filled the dimmed war room of the Eclipse. Surrounding the projection were the best tacticians and strategists the Jedi had to offer.
"We've already ruled out an attack on the Eclipse," Kenth Hamner, the official liaison between the Jedi and New Republic, motioned. "At least an attack in the near future. Even if they did have the ships to spare, they'd need at least a standard year to get from Borleias to here."
"The question still remains then," Kam Solusar, with his wife at his side, spoke up. "Where is that fleet going to go?"
Corran Horn minimized the Borleias map and brought up the map of Coruscant. In addition to the image of the planet, the holographic projection also revealed small clusters of comets within the planet's system. "Coruscant is the most likely target."
Luke looked the Kenth. "The uncharted asteroids orbiting with the OboRins?"
"We're aware of them," Kenth said. "We can take them out any time."
Ever since Corran had discovered that the Yuuzhan Vong employed space rock as cover, no one doubted that these comets were anything else other than reconnaissance vessels. The sheer number sitting in-system was indicative enough of a large scale invasion. One didn't send nor need several dozen scouts for a minor attack.

"We already know that they have been pulling their forces from battlefronts across the galaxy," Mara added. "If they're willing to lose ground in whatever offensive they're planning, Coruscant is a worthy target."
"Not only would they be striking a political and strategic blow, morale would definitely suffer if Coruscant falls," Corran nodded.
"This is it then," Luke pushed away from the projector, then, when his connection to his nephew flared to new heights, froze. Inhaling sharply, Luke suddenly saw a Yuuzhan Vong warrior charging past a tangle of burning vines. A purple blade, swirling amidst a golden light in a dark place. He could feel that his nephew was focused, though regretful. Calm, yet tinged with sadness. In harmony with the Force and himself and…
Distantly, Luke heard Tionne emit a small cry, a hand flying to her mouth. Kam quickly gathered his wife into a protective hug, as if trying to shield her from what they were feeling, what they believed would soon come. Though they were not Tahiri's biological parents, they had always been close to their former student, likening her to an adoptive daughter. It also didn't hurt that whenever Tahiri was with Anakin, her presence in the Force became amplified. But now, now her presence was disappearing completely.
The powerful tremor in the Force had started off strong, with both Anakin and Tahiri fighting fiercely at each other's side, glowing brightly and in sync with each other and the Force. But then, their presences gradually began to fade, weakening until they were almost distant echoes. Tionne closed her silver eyes, fresh tears escaping as she bit her lower lip and clung to Kam. Luke, for his part, simply turned away from the others, his hands shaking.
He knew that Saba Sebatyne had felt the death of the Hara sisters, and that others too had perished. The exact identity of the fallen was not known by Luke, but it was clear from the growing absence in the Force that the mission on Myrkr was exacting its toll on the younger Jedi. Luke inhaled sharply and closed his eyes. Now the team was losing Anakin and, if Kam and Tionne's reaction was anything to go by, Tahiri as well. What was worse, in Luke's mind, was that he had sent them *all*.
"Luke?" He was vaguely aware as Mara took his hand, brushing her shoulder against his in support. But he focused his attention instead on Jacen and Jaina. Jacen was eerily calm, his worry pushed to the back of his mind as he continued onwards. It was almost as if he had accepted his brother's sacrifice and was trying to make the most of it. More alarming was Jaina, whose own Force presence had flared

incandescently. For a brief moment of fear, Luke was afraid that the strike team was losing her too. When Luke realized what she was trying to do, his shoulders slumped and he bowed his head. He could only hope that it wouldn't end as he feared. Being so far from them, unable to help them, it was all he could do.
"Master Skywalker?" Corran asked, his voice subdued, as if he realized what was happening.
Luke steeled himself for the inevitable, doing his best to cut his connections with everyone so his emotional overflow wouldn't affect them. Yet, the end he feared, never came. Blue eyes wide in wonder, Luke took in several gasps of relief. He could feel his youngest nephew, just barely clinging to life. A fragile wisp in the overall flow of the Force. Exhaling loud, shaky breaths, Luke uncurled his fists and bowed his head, tears swimming in his eyes. Jaina had somehow succeeded. Anakin was alive. Albeit, barely present in the Force, but still there. Luke vented his pent up fear, guilt, and frustration by pounding the holo-projector with one hand, earning shouts of alarm and surprise from the others in the room.
Mara likewise seemed to slump in relief, leaning against Luke for a moment before smiling tiredly at the others, all of whom were anxiously awaiting an explanation.
"It's Anakin," Mara said, her smile surprising the others.
"Anakin?" Corran said, unsure what exactly had just occurred. If Mara was smiling, the news couldn't be bad, could it?
Mara nodded. "That little brat and Tahiri decided to give us old people a heart-attack."
"It seems to be what he and Tahiri are best at," Kam agreed, sounding stronger than he looked as he rubbed Tionne's back. The white-haired historian could only press her head against Kam's chest, weakly laughing as she wiped away her tears.
As the tension in the room subsided, and everyone let out chuckles of relief, Corran looked back to Luke. "Master Skywalker, what should we do now?"
He closed his eyes and drawing on Mara's presence to help steady himself. With his heart returning to its normal rate, Luke looked to his expectant audience. "We need to prepare our battle wings and coordinate defensive plans with Admiral Sovv. If the Yuuzhan Vong hit us with everything they have at Borleias, then we should probably focus on evacuating Coruscant."
"That's going to be impossible," Kenth said with a shake of his head. "There are billions of people there, so evacuation just isn't feasible. Not to mention it's the seat of our political and military councils. Just

mentioning the word will make Chief of State Fey'lya think that we have already given the planet up for loss."
"We're going to have to make it happen anyways," Mara said. "Luke is right. With our own fleets stretched thin, it will be equally impossible to get enough ships in place before the Vong strike."Kenth's lips thinned, but he nodded. "I'll see what I can do. But no promises."
"That's all we can ask."
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"I've got a bad feeling about this," Jacen murmured, glancing behind him at Ganner as they crawled through a Yuuzhan Vong-made tunnel. He could feel the voxyn queen not far ahead, but from what the creature was perceiving, there were also others close by. But apart from the warriors and shapers at its side, Jacen could feel another disturbance. What it was, however, he couldn't quite pinpoint it.
"We're on a planet full of Vong, chasing after a creature created to kill Jedi, and we have absolutely no idea where we're going. What's there to feel good about it?" Ganner said wryly. "Speaking of which, are we getting any closer?"
Jacen closed his eyes. The queen's agitation from being moved, the fear that it was being hunted, and its reaction to his Force probe was all Jacen needed. "Another couple meters straight, than a left."
"And your brother?"
Jacen allowed himself to chuckle, and he could feel Ganner's confusion. "He's alive, somehow."
Ganner whistled, then made a face as his hand slid across some type of gooey organic material. "Takes a lot to kill one of you Solos, doesn't it?"
"No," Jacen shook his head and sighed. "Anakin just got lucky. One of these days, that luck's going to run out and he's going to get himself, or others, killed."
"We made it this far with him as the leader," Ganner pointed out.
"Not all of us."
"Come on, Jacen," Ganner said. "We all knew that this was likely going to be a suicide mission. As cool as your brother is, he isn't all knowing."
Jacen shook his head. "Please tell him that next time. It was his heroics that have split the group."
"And you not wanting your brother to die doesn't have anything to do with the fact that you ordered your sister to save him?"
"Apart from that, if he died, Jaina would have been distracted. That distraction would have gotten more of us killed. At least, this way, she has a purpose and we can still get the mission done. It was the best choice available for everyone."

"You know, that sounds a lot like what Anakin would have said," Ganner commented mildly. "You two are more alike than you think."
"Apparently," Jacen conceded, unwilling to argue in their situation. He pulled out his lightsaber and cut away the membrane at their feet. The door opened quickly, and the two Jedi dropped through the opening.
"The queen is nearby."
"Yes, she is."
Both Jedi spun to see the bird-like Vergere emerge from the shadows of the room.
"You!"
"Me?"
"Jacen?"
"Vergere?"
"Hmm?"
"What?" Ganner blinked, his lightsaber still active.
Jacen held out a staying hand as he deactivated his own blade. "If she wanted to hurt us, she would have already done so."
"Indeed," Vergere's head bobbed. "If you wish, I can lead you to the queen."
"Why should we trust you?" Ganner asked with raised eyebrows. "You don't exactly keep the best of company."
"You can always try to find your own way of course." Vergere shrugged and began to walk to another membrane-door. "But this is the breeding grounds. One wrong step and you will find yourself confronted by voxyn, or worse."
Ganner blinked. "There are worse things here than voxyn?"
"I just said so, did I not?"
"Enough," Jacen said sharply. "If you want to lead us to the queen, do so already. Ganner and I still need to secure a way off this place for the others, and we don't have much time."
"How fortunate is it then that the queen and your way off are in the same place?" Vergere said, chortling. "I assume that you two Jedi aren't opposed to spilling a little more blood?"
Both men gave each other questioning looks, before nodding. "If this is some sort of trap…" Jacen let the threat hang.
"You'll kill me, of course. I have no intention of getting on the wrong side of two Jedi such as yourselves."
Jacen nodded once more to Ganner, who reluctantly shut off his lightsaber. With a snap-hiss, the room was plunged into darkness once more.
"Which way?"

The two traveled in near-darkness through a series of corridors and rooms, their elevation gradually rising. Just when Jacen began to doubt the trust he had placed on the odd Fosh creature, they paused at one final door.
"Jacen Solo, you can feel her, can you not?"
Jacen exhaled and reached out with the Force. "Yeah, she's out there."
"Are you prepared to sacrifice everything to destroy her?"
"It's what we came here to do," Jacen nodded again.
"Then, for whatever it is worth, may the Force be with the two of you."
Vergere pressed another pad by the doorway, and it silently slid open. A sliver of blue light from Myrkr's sun blazed out from behind Myrkr's rising disks. The pale sapphire light, splintered and distorted by the million columns of the serpentine room, drew out long, murky shadows against the wall and floor. The far air-lock door was open, the much smaller silhouettes of Yuuzhan Vong dwarfed by the towering columns around them. Between the warriors, however, both Jedi could see the voxyn queen. The three Force-users quickly pressed themselves behind the nearest columns, chancing glances at the distant group.
"The queen is there," Vergere motioned unnecessarily, her voice barely a whisper. "And the vessel you will need is over there." She motioned to a side door in the room. It was open, and through it, they could see two warriors guarding a medium-sized Yuuzhan Vong vessel. The door itself was still far away from the queen and those protecting her.
"That group is coming this way," Ganner murmured, a hand drifting back to his lightsaber. "They're probably heading for the ship."
"There are only eight guards in the group. Another two by the ship," Vergere commented mildly. "What will you do, Jacen Solo?"
Jacen reached out to the mind of the voxyn queen. He could already feel its agitation and it took little effort on his part to push it over the edge. He filled its mind with fear and suspicion and the creature lashed out in an instant. Its barbed tail swung around and slammed into the nearest warrior's face. Two others rushed forward and were suddenly covered in corrosive acid. Immediately, the shaper in the group barked orders to the others, and Jacen withdrew from the queen's mind as the warriors gripped its restraints. This did not stop a fourth warrior from succumbing to his wounds.
"Only four left," Vergere said, bowing her head in respect. "Good job."
Jacen ignored the odd creature, not proud nor sickened by his manipulation of the voxyn queen. He really had no desire to kill her, yet if he didn't, the sacrifices of the others would have been for naught. The remaining warriors and the creature's handlers regained

some semblance of order and continued forward, leaving the fallen where they lay.
"Ganner."
"Jacen?"
"Think you can take the two by the ship and start it up?"
"You have the queen?"
"Yeah."
"What about this one?" Ganner motioned to Vergere.
"She'll stay with me," Jacen replied. "If I miss this chance, I'll need her to guide me through this building."
Vergere tilted her head to the side. "As you wish."
Ganner stared at Jacen long and hard. Finally, the older Jedi nodded. "You really are like your brother."
Jacen closed his eyes. "Let's hope I have his luck, then."
Now!
Ganner burst into action and sprinted towards the docked vessel, drawing the attention and the alarm of the Yuuzhan Vong. Several guttural cries were emitted, and the air was suddenly saturated with thud bugs. The deadly projectiles tore away chunks of the organic columns in the room, embedding themselves in the wall or ground. Ganner continued his sprint, activating his lightsaber only when he passed the threshold of the side door. The two warriors were on him, but one was immediately sliced across the midsection and crumpled. The other lashed out with his amphistaff, but Ganner rolled to the side and scored a glancing blow.
In the meantime, Jacen traversed the greater distance across the room. He emerged from the shadows in time to see the shaper's eyes widen in surprise. Before Jacen's lightsaber landed, however, the surviving warriors rushed to the shaper's aid.
"*Jeedai!"* One cursed, thrusting his amphistaff forward.
Another warrior swept the organic weapon at Jacen's head, but the Jedi had already leaped back into the shadows. The warriors quickly formed a protective screen in front of the voxyn queen and where they last saw Jacen. They didn't expect, however, the queen to once again lash out. Unprotected, two warriors fell before they even realized what had hit them. The remaining warriors and shaper spun around, only to hear the dreaded hiss of a lightsaber.
Despite Ganner and Jacen's early success, the alarm had been sounded. Warriors began streaming in from many different entryways, their sapphire-lit forms swarming towards the lone lightsaber.
"Ganner, take off!" Jacen yelled, ending the life of the shaper. "Take off, get everyone else out of here!"

More warriors, some heading for the ship.
Go!
Jacen released the breath he had been holding as the ship shot away from its berth. Once it was gone, Jacen knelt by the voxyn queen. Sending calming thoughts, he held out a hand.
"Forgive me," Jacen murmured. In one quick motion, he ended the creature's life. He set a thermal detonator and placed it into its lifeless mouth. Using the force to push the creature high into the air, he waited the longest three seconds of his life. One. Two. Three. A fiery explosion engulfed the body, completely obliterating it and any possible chance of recovering a tissue sample.
Once his job was done, Jacen deactivated his lightsaber and placed it on the ground. He sat down behind it, releasing a deep breath and running his mind through several calming techniques. He had done it, and Ganner would now save the others. He had completed what he had set out to do. But, unlike Anakin, he was not stupid enough to go out fighting. He had won his battle, now he would pay his price. He could hear the pounding footsteps of the approaching warriors.
Out of curiosity, he glanced towards Vergere. She had always been a mystery. Why had she helped him? What would she do now? But when he saw her, he felt a small amount of shock race through him.
"Vergere….are you…?"
"Yes," Vergere said softly, a feathery hand lightly caressing Jacen's cheek. "I am crying for you, Jacen."
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Though the remaining members of the strike team were recovered by Ganner's stolen Yuuzhan Vong frigate, the Jedi were not home free just yet. When the Jedi had boarded, Jacen's absence had been glaringly obvious. Ganner had managed to hold off the questions until he had safely hidden the ship at the bottom of a deep gorge. But upon revealing what had transpired, already frayed nerves were pushed to their breaking point.
"You left him?" Jaina yelled, her eyes flashing dangerously as she slammed Ganner against the far cabin wall.
"He told me to!" Ganner managed to get out. Talking with a forearm to one's throat was a challenge, even for a Jedi of Ganner's caliber. "I saw it from above, Nom Anor was surrounding you guys again! If I hadn't gone, none of us would have a ride off this planet!"
"But you left him!" Jaina hissed, only releasing Ganner when Zekk put a restraining hand on her shoulder. She instead turned on him. "Don't touch me, Zekk!"
"Jaina…"

Jaina's glare silenced him. "We're going back!"
"Even if we do go back, it's doubtful if Jacen will still be there!" Zekk argued. "Besides, Anakin and Tahiri are in critical condition, and we have an entire Vong fleet searching for us!"
"Anakin and Tahiri can survive the five minutes it will take to rescue Jacen," Jaina clenched her jaw stubbornly. "Do you really think I'll abandon my twin to the Vong!"
"Jaina, I too agree with Ganner and Zekk," Tenel Ka's voice cut into the argument, drawing everyone's attention. "Jacen would not want us to waste his sacrifice by dying as well."
"Stay out of this, Tenel Ka!" Jaina snapped. "I don't need to hear the opinion of someone who has the emotional depth of a ronto."
With a speed that surprised both Ganner and Zekk, Tenel Ka stepped around the chairs in the cockpit and stood toe-to-toe with Jaina. The motion was so fast that the two men thought, for one ridiculous moment, that she would slap Jaina. Instead, Tenel Ka pinned Jaina under a glare so fierce, that Jaina eventually swallowed and looked away.
When she did so, Tenel Ka spoke. "He may not be my brother, but I care greatly for Jacen, Jaina. If we did not have other responsibilities, I would be the first to assist you in his rescue. But this is not the time, nor the place. You *will* see him again, that is a fact."
Tenel Ka's gaze contained only understanding as she held out her good hand disarmingly. Jaina replied to Tenel Ka's words by silently moving to the nearest bulkhead and resting against it. The exhausted brown-haired Jedi slid down into a seated position, her knees pulled to her chest and head bowed. Neither said another word, and silence filled the ship. In another place, another time, the silence might have been uncomfortable, but Tenel Ka's words were neither accusatory nor biting. Even Jaina's hostility began to fade as she got over the initial shock.
She knew that if they went after Jacen they'd be jeopardizing everything. Yet, Jaina couldn't help but feel that she had traded one brother for another. If she and the others had gone with Jacen when Anakin and Tahiri were buying them the much needed time…she shut off that line of thought. Anakin and Tahiri would have died. She was as sure of that. Jaina absently reached through the Force for her twin, Jacen was still alive. He still lived. It was that one fact that kept a spark of hope glowing within her.
"I'm sorry," Jaina finally allowed.
"We are all worried," Tenel Ka nodded once, then turned to the two men. "Friend Zekk, are you capable of piloting this ship?"

Zekk gave the helm a once-over, then slid into the pilot's chair. "It looks like a standard set-up. If Ganner could fly it, I should have no problem."
Ganner made a face. "Hey, nearly crashing the ship isn't as bad as actually crashing it! I got us here in one piece, didn't I?"
"If I recall, it was a crash landing," Tenel Ka raised an eyebrow. "The ground came out of nowhere."
"Yes, even the ground is plotting against you," Zekk said dryly. Then, with more confidence than before, he looked towards Jaina. "I can pilot this bucket."
"We still have the little issue of a Yuuzhan Vong battle fleet orbiting this place," Ganner pointed out, taking the co-pilot chair. "Where are we going to go from here?"
"Anakin and Tahiri both need bacta treatment, so it has to be somewhere with a medical facility. "Zekk began a pre-flight sequence.
"That narrows down the field," Ganner responded to Jaina. "Coruscant then?"
"The Hapes Cluster is closer," Tenel Ka voiced. "They also have capable enough defenses."
"Yeah…but we're in a Vong ship," Zekk motioned to the control nodule in front of him. "We fly in, we might become victims of those defenses."
"We will deal with that problem when we get to it," Jaina finally spoke, getting to her feet. "But we should start heading there anyways. The sooner we get Anakin and Tahiri to a medical center, the better."
"The Hapes Cluster it is," Zekk sighed, starting up the ship again.
Jaina moved to Ganner's chair. "Get out."
"Jaina?"
"We're about to blast our way through who knows how many Vong ships. Do you really want to be driving a ship you just barely managed to get off the ground?"
"Point taken."
"So," Zekk managed with a ghost of a smirk. "I guess you're my co-pilot again, Solo."
Despite everything, Jaina also smiled faintly. "I guess so. Let's burn fuel and kick some Vong butt."
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After conquering the galaxy star by star, the Yuuzhan Vong were now washing upon the heart of the New Republic in an unrelenting tide. The skies above Coruscant burned with flame, the air choked with smoke, as Yuuzhan Vong drop fleets rained down. The hardy, shell-like pods smashed through buildings, tearing great gouges in the durasteel,

leaving only red-hot trails in their wake. To the terror of its residents, the planet was bathed in darkness from the destruction of the mirror stations. The only sources of light were from the planetary defense stations, as beams of red and green light filled the air. In the far distance, an occasional vessel erupted in balls of flame, its skeleton visible until the fire had burned out in the vacuum of space.
But there were more ships in the air, far more than the planet's turbolasers could destroy. Waves of coralskippers and skiffs flew at low altitudes, pinpointing weapon batteries and obliterating them with volleys of lethal plasma. These fighters were soon met by a swarm of New Republic craft, though it was obvious that the defenders were overmatched and outnumbered. One by one, these fighters also erupted into spouts of flame, debris raining down onto the city below. Other weapon stations were overwhelmed as the landed warriors stormed the crew, killing all without mercy. Buildings that had the fortune to be shielded, lasted the first, and maybe the second attacks before crumbling under the relentless onslaught of the invaders. As the amount of fire from the surface began to dwindle, larger landing craft began to descend.
Standing speechless in the open cannon turret atop Fey'lya's office, Leia looked on. There was a strange beauty in the meteoric fall of the drop fleets, a primal rhythm to the pulsing of the turbolasers. Magma and plasma rained down on the planet indiscriminately, giving everything a deep red hue. Coruscant was burning, dying, right before her eyes. Leia felt a pair of arms wrap around her waist, and she looked over her shoulder wanly.
"The end of the world," Han quipped, a helmet, equipped with a military comlink, in his grasp. "Who would have thought we'd live to see it?"
"They'll be other worlds, Han." Leia made no effort to put on the helmet as the devastation reflected off her brown irises. "Besides, we still have something much more important."
"Oh yeah? What's that?"
"Our children, Han," Leia shook her head. She found it odd, though a world was burning in front of her, she was comforted by the fact that all of her children were still alive. That one, brief moment, when Anakin had stood out in the Force like a super nova had nearly shut her mind down in fear. But when he had come through, Leia found herself looking at the galaxy through a new perspective. Finally, she reached for the helmet her husband was holding and began to put it on. "We may have lost this world, but there'll always be others. There was after

Alderaan. Our children, however, nothing will ever be able to replace them."
Han's expression softened. "You got that right, Princess. Are you sure Anakin's…?"
"He's alive," Leia whispered. "That's really all that matters, doesn't it?"
Han gave Leia his usual, crooked smile. "Yeah, that kid will pull through. He has your stubbornness after all."
"Says the man who refuses to trade in the Falcon for a more advanced ship," Leia couldn't help but smile at Han's affronted expression.
Any further conversation was cut off as General Rieekan's voice crackled over the comlink. "All units, open fire."
Across the planet, turbolaser batteries that had been hidden in the darkness suddenly blared to life. Han squeezed the trigger of the turret before him, and the air filled with a deafening crackle of discharging actuators. The deadly red jewel lanced up into the air and took the first lander by surprise, punching straight through the middle of the vessel, splitting it in two. Bodies fell out the opening as both halves of the craft spun apart in different directions. But with the element of surprise now spent, shielding crews onboard the other crafts made shooting them down much more difficult. Han and Leia stitched their fire in different directions, taking down as many as they could. But it was not enough. Still coralskippers and airskiffs filled the sky, soon accompanied by blast boulders. A group of them joined together in formation and began to barrel down on Fey'lya's office.
It was at that moment that the doors to the turbolift opened, and Borsk Fey'lya, accompanied by two Orbital Defense soldiers, strode in. The pair were so much alike that they could even have passed as twins. Just thinking that thought, Leia once again thanked the Force for keeping her children alive. Her introspection, however, caused her to realize something else about both soldiers.
"Han," Leia said lightly, her fingers absently tapping her lightsaber.
Before Han could reply, Fey'lya called out. "Leia, you have a comm-message. Feel free to use my desk."
Leia ignored him. "Han!"
"A little busy here!" Han called out, attempting to take down a blastboulder.
"We have *friends* with us," Leia stressed.
Han finally looked to Leia, and she turned, using her body to shield her lightsaber from view of the newcomers. Eyes widening in understanding, Han swiftly drew his blaster. The two Orbital Defense soldiers, who had not even made their way across the room, were felled in a hail of blaster fire.

"Have you lost your minds!" Fey'lya cried out. His jaw snapped shut, however, when the ooglith masquers peeled away from the faces of the corpses. "In my own office!"
"Now would be a good time to destroy those data towers, Chief of State," Leia said.
Fey'lya eyes flashed, but any reply was cut off when the wall beside him erupted in a storm of flame and shrapnel. The Chief of State was lifted off the ground by the force of the blast and slammed into the opposite wall with a sickening crunch as a blast boulder broke through. The ship didn't withdraw, but instead forced its weapons into the newly made hole and opened fire. Whatever plans or schemes Fey'lya had been saving, however he had planned to go out, ended right then and there.
Both Leia and Han dove behind Fey'lya's desk as a plasma missile flew out of the ship and impacted with an eardrum-shattering roar. Gouts of flame filled the office, superheating the air and blowing a hole through the opposite wall. In a split second, Borsk Fey'lya, seasoned politician and the Chief of State of the New Republic, ceased to exist.
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"We've just got word, people!" The captain's voice strained as he struggled to compete with the roaring of the turbolaser battery. "The Chief of State's office has just been hit, but this is no time to worry about politicians. We have a second wave coming through, so snap to it!"
Luke felt the entire turret housing rumble, making the captain's words unnecessary. The bright sheet of flames crackling down from above was evidence enough that this wave would be larger than the first. An attack that had already destroyed most of Coruscant's turrets. What Luke was alarmed by, however, was the first part of the captain's announcement.
"Han and Leia will make it," Mara said firmly, not needing to sense Luke's thoughts. "We'll feel it if anything happens to them."
"That's if they can make it through this wave."
"That's if *we* can make it through this wave," Mara pointed out. "The first one was to soften us up. It looks like they're serious this time around."
Despite Mara's attempt to put up a strong front, he could feel her uncertainty towards their only child, they mirrored his own. They had left Ben with Leia and Han, and the Force only knew how the two would make it out of this chaos. Luke did not even want to consider a negative outcome. He had already come too close to one as it was with his nephew. Mara, though she disliked having to rely on anyone else,

was oddly upbeat about the situation. Her confidence in Leia and Han bolstered his own, and, in the end, he simply decided to trust his sister and the Force.

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Normally, when one has a near-death experience, one would expect something out of the ordinary to occur. Maybe a meeting with deceased ancestors, a trip down memory lane, an out-of-body experience, or at least something to use in a conversation. Something along the lines of, 'So I nearly died, but I at least got to meet Mr. Famous So-and-So.' This expectation is only increased when one is a Jedi. Not so with Anakin Solo. He currently found himself in a grey void, simply floating, body-less and unaware of where he was.

Great, I really must have screwed up in a past life. Not only can I not die when I plan to, I can't even have a normal near-death experience.

What'd you expect, Hero Boy? A parade of departed Jedi Masters coming to scold you for doing something so stupid? That's my job.

Tahiri?

No, I'm a talking bantha!

That'd be an improvement.

When we wake up, I am so kicking you.

For what? That was tame by comparison!

The kick is for you running off and doing that…that stupid, heroic, solo act of yours.

Very nice, did it take a while for you to come up with that?

Anakin!

What? Despite not having any corporeal body, or even seeing her, Anakin could easily imagine her glare.

Were you really going to sacrifice…never mind, I know the answer already. Throughout the entire mission, you never ever thought about yourself. Your pain, your frustration with yourself every time we lost members of the strike team, I felt it all even when you were trying to block me out.

Anakin flinched at the biting tone in her voice.

I saw you analyzing our situation again and again, constantly blaming yourself. Even when you were badly injured, all you thought about was completing the mission and getting the rest of us out of there. Keeping up that insane pace, not even stopping for a moment's rest. In fact, to anyone else, it was like you were doing your best to<u>get</u>yourself killed. Funny, isn't it? Good thing I know you better than that.

Tahiri…

You big dummy! Did you even stop to think about what would happen after you died?

Of course! Anakin protested.*Though, like the rest of my plans this mission, that didn't work out either. You and the others would have gotten away, killed the queen, flown off and ended the war.*
And then what?
After the war?
Yeah?
Anakin wasn't sure what Tahiri was trying to tell him. *Well, after the war, I guess you and the others would live long, happy lives. Or at least I would hope they are long and happy.*
Anakin, do you really see me capable of living a long happy life if you're not in it?
Why not?
In answer to his question, there was a distinctly exasperated sigh.*I don't know if you still haven't realized it yet, but you're probably the only person that actually cares what happens to me. My only family. Although, judging by your little bit of heroics, you occasionally have lapses in memory.*
That's not true, Kam and Tionne care for you too, and my family…
*Your family only lets me hang around because of you, Anakin. If you're gone, they won't really have a reason to look after me. Besides pity of course.*There was no accusatory or bitterness in her voice. It was as if Tahiri was simply stating facts. *I'm 'Vong Girl,' remember? The orphan from Tatooine, the one who really only has one best friend in the entire galaxy. I've had enough traumatic experiences to last me a lifetime, and I don't want to add 'losing you' to that list if I can help it. If anyone has any chance of understanding me, it's you, not Kam, or Tionne, or anyone else, no matter how nice they might be. You've been my only family since we first met, remember?*
Like I could forget, Anakin replied softly. The image of a nine year old, barefooted Tahiri flashed through his mind.
*So now that you know that. Tell me, Anakin, as strong as our bond is, what exactly would I have felt if I had just let you do what you had planned? If I had let you die for all of us, how would that have made**me**feel?*
Tahiri… Though Anakin did not have any physical form he was aware of, he still closed his eyes. In the world they were in, her feelings were coming in loud and clear over their bond. She was deliberately opening herself up to the pain and fear that had consumed her in her mad dash to catch up.
Fear that she wouldn't reach him in time, regret that she never told him her true feelings.
Physical pain just from the very idea of losing him.

Terror and desperation unlike any she had experienced before. Heart clenching, breathing short, nothing else but a dark, loneliness.
*That's just what I felt when I thought I was going to lose you.*Tahiri sent in a soft rebuke. *I would rather be Shaped again, than endure the pain your death would have caused me. The Yuuzhan Vong made me able to absorb and use my pain, but even then, I have my limits.*
Anakin felt a shudder travel across their bond, and he absently reached out towards her general direction in an effort to comfort her. He knew how badly her Shaping had affected her. How she was still suffering from the after-effects of whatever the shapers had done.
He would often find himself lying awake in bed for hours at a time as Tahiri's pain and nightmares bled over. When she would awake, she would spend whatever was left of the night mentally chatting with him, brushing her mind with his as she rebuilt her emotional barriers. There were also the more serious moments, when she would sort through her memories and feelings. For the most part, she would use her own strength to get through it.
There were a few occasions, however, when she actually needed to rely on his own power, in addition to hers, to get past a particularly painful memory. The closeness they shared never really alarmed Anakin. To him, it was a natural thing, something that had existed ever since they had first met. As they grew older, they only became closer. He couldn't help but smile as he recalled that kiss on the airless space station. It seemed so long ago. Yet, it paled in comparison to his most recent kiss. One where neither had been afraid to hide their emotions from the other.
*When we shared that kiss...*Tahiri trailed off. The atmosphere between the two of them changed. Her embarrassment, tinged with a hint of wonder, came through their bond. *When we shared that kiss, did you really mean it...what you were feeling?*
You were in my head.
But still...a scarred up girl like me, how could you... Tahiri trailed off again, but for a different reason this time. Anakin was firmly recalling the kiss and every bit of emotion that had passed through them in that moment in eternity. *Oh.*
*Would now be a good time to tell you that really I love you, Tahiri? Great, wait until we're practically dead to tell me you love me. You really, really need to work on your timing, Solo.*Despite her words, Tahiri's warmth and happiness infused every aspect of Anakin's being.
I'll get right on it.
You do that. Now I believe you were going to tell me something.
Anakin chuckled softly and smiled his lopsided grin. *I love you, Tahiri*

Love you too.
That's a relief.
I really don't really know why I love you, though.
That hurt.
You'll live…or…you better.
I will.
When we get out of wherever this is, we're going to have to talk about this, you know.
Let me guess, you're not the type of girl who confesses her love on her death bed?
Knew you'd understand. Now, where are we anyways and what's with all this greyness? We're not dead, are we? I mean we're still talking and stuff, right, so how can we be dead?
You're just realizing this now? We've been in this place since…oh, a while.
More important things were on my mind.
And now?
It's kinda feeling warm and mushy, hard to think, and it's all your fault.
My fault?
You did say you love me.
Anakin chuckled softly. *I did, didn't I?*
Tahiri went quiet for a moment. *Any regrets?*
*None,*Anakin replied firmly.
Good, now that we got that settled, since you avoided my question, I take it you don't know where we are either?
Worried?
You're here too, aren't you?
It seems like it.
Then no.
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Jaina sat back in the pilot's chair, of Nom Anor's personal craft, exhausted physically and mentally. The escape from Myrkr had been harrowing. Without Tahiri, they had had no access to the ship's weaponry or sensors. As such, they had been forced to rely on both her and Zekk's piloting skills to get through an entire fleet of Vong vessel, while visually confirming everything and dealing with an extremely reluctant ship.
Though normally piloted by a cognition hood, a ship the size of Nom Anor's personal vessel also had a rudimentary yoke, which responded to the touch and pressure of the user. It had taken some trial and error to get the hang of the ship's workings. But of it weren't for this 'manual' control, they never would have made it off planet.

Needless to say, their ship didn't survive the encounter wholly intact. After somehow jumping to lightspeed, Lowbacca reported that the ship was repairing itself, but at a very slow rate. They would be lucky if it even held up until they reached Hapes.
Hapes, and hopefully safety.
Jaina closed her eyes as her mind whirled with various thoughts. As tired as she was, she just couldn't bring herself to go to sleep. Not with everything that had just happened within the past few days. She knew that she should be feeling *something* about the Jedi who had died on the mission, Jedi with whom she had only been smiling and conversing with barely a week ago. But for some reason, she didn't. She had lost friends before, Anni Capstan and Chewbacca to name a few, but never before has she been so unnerved, so scared over *nearly* losing someone. She had abandoned one brother and nearly lost another. That thought alone caused her heart to skip a beat.
Seeing Anakin charge into the heart of the Yuuzhan Vong formation, sacrificing himself so they could live, had paralyzed her with fear. To heck with the 'he was becoming One with the Force' business, Jaina thought to herself. No matter how you put it, dead was dead. The thought circled in her mind like an unwanted mynok.
She had nearly lost her little brother. *She* was supposed to be the one to protect him, not the other way around. Jaina felt a twinge of guilt. If it hadn't been for Tahiri, Anakin wouldn't be with them now. Jaina would rather have a battered Tahiri, near death, than no brother. She was eternally grateful that the younger teen's feelings for Anakin had caused her to do something so…Solo-like.
Anakin and Tahiri. Jaina felt some part of her tired mind jolt as if hit by the energy from an overloaded power coupling. The very idea was strange, yet, in many ways, it made sense. It just seemed, right, perfect, that the two were together.
She had heard from Tekli how Anakin and Tahiri had shared that final kiss. How, as soon as Tesar had awoken, the young blond girl had sprinted after Anakin as if her very existence depended on it. She knew the two were best friends, fast becoming something more, and she shuddered to think what would happen if that kiss hadn't been shared. If the two hadn't been given that push to be together one final time so that their relationship could change once more. Without a doubt, it was that kiss that had convinced Tahiri to abandon any sense of self-preservation and charge after Anakin.
Jaina clearly recalled the mixture of terror, but also relief, when she saw Tahiri rushing to Anakin's side. Though it had been obvious that

both were most likely going to die, the fact that they were doing so together, had given Jaina a strange feeling of comfort.
"You need me to take over?" Zekk's voice startled Jaina.
"Could use someone to help keep me awake," Jaina shrugged.
"You could probably use some sleep more," Zekk replied dryly, sliding into the co-pilot seat.
"Can't," Jaina said simply.
Zekk glanced at her. "Jaina."
"How's Anakin and Tahiri?"
Recognizing her desire to switch the conversation away from her, Zekk sighed. "They're still holding on, somehow. Tekli put the both of them in some type of Force healing coma a while ago, so they'll both be out of it for some time. Alema and Tesar are currently with them while Tekli is getting some rest."
Jaina took the news in stride. "That's good."
"We're still on course for Hapes?"
"We'll get there in another day."
"That's good."
"Yeah."
An uneasy silence filled the cockpit.
"I've talked with Ganner," Zekk ventured.
"Good for you."
"Jaina…"
"Look Zekk, you and the others have made it clear. I can't do anything for Jacen. What I will do, however, is to make damned sure that Anakin and Tahiri live. So don't mention it again, clear?"
"Clear," Zekk said. He could clearly feel the fear she was trying to bottle up and knew that nothing good would occur should the worst happen. An awkward silence stretched through the cockpit. He and Jaina had used to be so close, but with the war the distance between them seemed to have increased exponentially.
"Is it a bad thing?" Jaina began in a voice so small that Zekk nearly missed it.
"Jaina?"
"Is it a bad thing that I'm relieved that it was Jacen who was taken and not Anakin?"
Zekk, startled by her question, quickly searched for an answer. "Of course not, Jaina. Anakin is your little brother after all."
Jaina swallowed. "No, I'm not relieved because of that."
"You're not?"

"It's like this," Jaina murmured, her hair cascading around her face as she hung her head. "For the past two years, I've listened to Anakin and Jacen debate the role of Jedi and our relationship to the Force."
Zekk opened his mouth to respond, but Jaina quickly shook her head to silence him. "Anakin is just beginning to figure it out. After he rescued Tahiri on Yavin Four, I sensed something different about him. He learned something there, something the rest of us don't know but should. So I'm relieved not only because he is my brother, but because whatever he had learned won't end with him. He has always been different. Special."
"And Jacen?
Jaina unconsciously reached out through the Force for her twin, before quickly abandoning her attempt. The last thing she wanted to do was feel any of his pain. "Jacen…he's just Jacen, my twin. My brother. You saw him this mission, he was always second guessing Anakin, obsessing over his motives and methods. Jacen tried to make Anakin question everything he believed in because he didn't agree with him. You saw what happened every time that happened. It tore the group apart, bit by bit. People died because even Anakin began to lose faith in himself. Jacen fears the dark side to such an extent that he would rather the Jedi quibble about the how's and whys of their actions than actually doing something about it. At least Anakin was willing to do *something* in this war."
Zekk was about to respond, when he felt stray bits of emotion come across their bond. Incredulous at what he was sensing, he turned his full attention to Jaina. "You blame Jacen for Anakin's injuries?"
Jaina was too tired to even try to keep her feelings and memories from leaking to her childhood acquaintance. "A little."
"You can't blame yourself for Anakin's condition any more than you can blame you can blame Jacen." Zekk protested. "Sure Jacen may have caused Anakin to doubt himself, but Jacen did so to keep Anakin from making any rash decisions. To make sure that Anakin wasn't going to sacrifice everything, even his own morals, for the sake of the mission. It was Anakin's own recklessness that nearly got him killed. His own confidence in himself that caused the mission to dissolve as fast as it did. I'm not saying Anakin is at fault for everything, but had he taken the time to think about his actions, the mission may have turned out better."
Jaina's brandy brown eyes held no warmth as they met Zekk's, letting the other know that he was fast losing whatever friendship they might have still had. "He nearly died because the rest of us were too thickheaded too see that he was suffering the most out of all of us.

Anakin was injured because he was trying to protect me. His situation deteriorated because he was trying to keep the rest of us alive; and he almost died because he was trying to redeem himself in Jacen's eyes, his big brother. For Sith's sake, he thought it would make the situation better if he gave his life so that all of us could get away! Anakin believed, just as you do, that he was responsible for getting us into this mess, and that it was *he* who needed to get us out of it. The fact that we all thought the same just goes to show how stupid we really are! You even said it yourself, he was the leader, it was *his* mission, *his* responsibility to get us off that planet. Never once did we stop to think that he was something more than the ideal figurehead everyone's trying to make him out to be. It took me, seeing him rush into that crowd of Vong, to remind me of one painful fact. He's just a seventeen year old kid. A kid everyone in this galaxy has decided to look to because they can't solve their own *kriffing* problems!"

Zekk answered in subdued tones, hanging his head sadly as he felt the raw emotion now pouring from Jaina's non-existent mental barriers. "As much as you think that, Jaina, you won't be able to change anyone else's minds. Sure his near death may have reminded everyone here that he's only human, but do you really think anyone else will care? You already know it, don't you? That the minute we return to New Republic space, he'll be treated as a hero once more. Never mind that he nearly died and that we've lost several good friends in the process. All the politicians, even the older Jedi, will see Anakin as nothing more than a pawn to advance their own plans. At the same time though, you know as well as I do that Anakin's own thoughts and feelings on the matter will be ignored. Borsk Fey'lya will probably even pin a medal to Anakin's jumpsuit while Anakin's still floating in bacta. Even Jacen will become a hero. The spin-machines will turn his capture into some heroic sacrifice on par with the actions of Anakin and Tahiri. The others who died will be given a token ceremony and then forgotten. As far as anyone will be concerned, this mission was a great success. Not only were the mission objectives accomplished, but the galaxy gets two of the three Solo's back again."

Jaina's head was bowed and she remained silent, so Zekk continued. "Once all that occurs, do you really expect to see the younger Jedi treat Anakin the same? They barely know Anakin, but here is he, marching us into a suicide mission and bringing us back out. Anakin's fast becoming a symbol for the Jedi Order, their hope. He *has* to be better than the average Jedi. He *has* to think about the consequences of his actions. You heard Master Horn last time, half the older Jedi already see him succeeding Master Skywalker as the next Jedi Grandmaster,

the others don't even plan to protest it should that time come. It doesn't matter that Anakin is only a seventeen year old kid at heart, because he's going to have to grow up a whole lot faster. After this mission, he'll be facing responsibilities that would destroy people much greater than him."

"He won't be the only one facing those responsibilities," Jaina murmured, her fists clenching as she, even though she hated to do so, conceded Zekk's point. "If I know her like I think I do, Tahiri will be there at his side all the way. I will be too. All of us who truly know him, trust and love him, we'll be right there with him. If there is such thing as destiny, then I believe that Anakin was destined to reshape this Order, to give it something that they lost a very long time ago. I'll be damned if I let my brother try something as crazy as this without me."

Jaina's message was clear as starred down her childhood friend. He would either be helping her protect Anakin, or walk a different path that practically guaranteed the ending of whatever relationship they had left.

Her face was impassive as Zekk took a deep breath. "We may not always see eye to eye on things, Jaina, and I know that we haven't exactly been the closest of friends recently. Even then, I still consider Anakin my friend. His survival shows that, no matter what the galaxy will throw at us, at the very least we'll still be able to trust in the Force, right?"

At his words, Jaina couldn't help but feel a small amount of disappointment. He was as good as saying that there were limits to how far he was willing to go for them. Then again, even though he hadn't said anything she didn't already know, Jaina was once again reminded of how different their opinions had become. Zekk's cautiousness of the dark side mirrored Jacen's. She still hadn't forgotten that he, along with Jacen, had been among those who had voted *against* going after the voxyn queen. Unwilling to continue the conversation for fear of revealing just *how* different their views had become, Jaina stood.

"You know, I think I'll go into a healing trance after all. We still have a while until Hapes, anyways."

Zekk watched her retreating form with some amount of trepidation, but also a hint of nostalgia. The war really was changing Jaina, shaping her into someone he could no longer recognize. He clearly remembered the fun times they had as youth, going up against bounty hunters and the random criminal organization.

It had been Jaina who had been willing to risk her life to redeem him. Jaina who had pulled him back into the light side. But now, now he

didn't quite know what to think. She wasn't falling to the dark side, that much he was sure. Her brothers were too important to her for that. She put a strong front to everyone now, but deep down, Zekk knew that some remnant of the hopeful teen who had saved him, survived. It wasn't that she didn't care, but that she cared too much.
Jaina may have recognized the pressures everyone was placing on Anakin, but Zekk wondered if she recognized the pressures she was placing on herself. This was on top of the fame she already had by being a child of Han and Leia Solo, a Jedi, and one of the best, youngest pilots in Rogue Squadron. Though Jaina wanted to watch out for her younger brother, who was watching out for her? It was as if she stopped caring about what would happen to herself.
Zekk shuddered as a Force vision momentarily flashed through his mind. That was it. Jaina was slowly turning herself into a weapon. If Anakin was to be the Jedi Order's heart, than Jaina was turning into its sword. Hardening, sharpening herself to protect those she cared for. But weapons were not indestructible, and Zekk swore to himself to be there for her when the time came. When the Sword of the Jedi finally broke.
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A/N: Welcome to the beginning of a very long ride. This AU story will follow aspects of the EU canon from the New Jedi Order series with many plot twists and tweaks to the story arcs. A sequel is in the works as well, covering post-NJO era, to be posted in the far future.
7/7/12: Edited for minor grammar, spelling and wording errors. As of this edit, I am currently half way through my version of Final Prophecy.

ADA 2

Two
|* *|
The inhuman wail that swept through the small ship was heard by all, and the despair that accompanied it was just as crippling. Almost simultaneously, an equally distraught cry rang out. The already exhausted strike team couldn't help but mirror Jaina and Tenel Ka's sorrows as Jacen's death swept over them like an unexpected tidal wave.
Ganner, who was at the cockpit, simply stared out into the vast expanse of space, his eyes dull. It had been his decision to leave Jacen behind, and though he knew that it had been the right one, it didn't

make Jacen's death any easier to bear. The two may not have been close, but Ganner's stomach couldn't help but churn with guilt. Again, he had to leave someone behind to die. Again, someone else lived and he didn't. The anguish overflowing from two of the strongest women he knew only added to his own.
Next to him, Zekk bowed his head, obviously trying to control his own emotions as unshed tears shone in his eyes. Ganner could only imagine what it was like for the younger man. It was common knowledge, almost to the point of infamy, that the Solo twins, Tenel Ka, Lowbacca, and Zekk had seen their fair share of trouble in their earlier years. Their tightly knit group and the trust that they had with each other had been evident by the way they reacted on Myrkr. Ganner couldn't fathom what it would be like to lose someone of that importance.
"Zekk," Ganner swallowed. "Go check on Jaina. I've got everything under control up here."
To Ganner's surprise, Zekk shook his head ruefully. "I'll probably be the last person she wants to see now. We had a…disagreement earlier on"
"Disagree…" Ganner's question was interrupted when the ship jolted to a stop. "Sithspit!"
Zekk quickly glanced out of the viewport. The hulking mass of a dovin basal mine, a Yuuzhan Vong weapon capable of producing enough gravimetric force to pull a ship out of hyperspace, was floating in front of them. Only a second later, an explosion rocked the ship violently.
"The Vong have found us!" Zekk yelled back over his shoulder as he gripped the yoke of the ship.
Their stolen Yuuzhan Vong vessel lurched back into motion, narrowly avoiding a wave of plasma missiles.
"It's a mine field," Zekk called out, his eyes scanning the space. "Head hard to port, we'll take cover in that asteroid field nearby."
"Great, all we have to do is fly through an asteroid field and we're clear," Ganner said. "No big deal."
"You got a better idea?"
"Jeedai, this is Harrar, priest of Yun-Harla, you are surrounded. Surrender the Ksstarr now and I will grant you a swift death."
Both Jedi looked to the villip, then at each other.
"Stroke the inverted villip, Jeedai, if you wish to beg for mercy."
Before either male could reach for the device, Jaina's hand beat them to it. "This is Jaina Solo, it will be a warm day on Hoth before we surrender *our* ship to you."
"It is not your vessel!"

"It is, and you know what? I think the Trickster is the perfect name for it, thanks for the idea."
"Blasphemer! At this moment my yammosk is making contact with your ship's dovin basal. Any minor control that you have over the Ksstarr… "
"The Trickster."
"Will be superseded," Harrar continued through her interruption. *"I will take great joy in sacrificing you to the goddess!*
"You're forgetting one thing," Jaina said, a dark glint in her eyes as she glared at the Vong priest.
"What?"
"I *am* Yun-Harla," Jaina remarked, cutting the transmission.
"Ummm, Jaina? You do know we don't have any weapons or sensors?" Zekk said hesitantly.
Jaina, however, ignored him, displacing Ganner and taking control of the ship's helm. The ship abruptly reversed course and began a slow fly-by along the line of laid out dovin basal mines.
Both Zekk and Ganner stared at Jaina incomprehensibly when they realized that the Yuuzhan Vong were not pursuing. The ship shook several times, but it was from the gravimetric effects of the mines and not the plasma weaponry of the Vong fleet.
Occasionally, Jaina would stop the *Trickster* and hover, continuing on only when she received a single click over her comlink. It was Zekk who finally managed to voice his confusion.
"Jaina?"
"Lowbacca and Tesar have been playing with the ship sensors. We can receive but we don't transmit. Not that that does us any good."
"What?"
"Besides, a goddess doesn't need weapons or sensors," Jaina suddenly sent the ship barreling towards the asteroid field as Alema emerged into the cockpit.
Zekk sent a cautious glance at his co-pilot. "Jaina, care to share your plan?"
"You really have to ask that, Zekk? I'm going to kill every last member of Harrar's fleet. Then I'll let Tenel Ka handle him personally."
"That's…"
"Zekk, don't lecture me about vengeance or the dark side! I'm fed up with all these squabbles about the Force. They nearly got Anakin and Tahiri killed. It *just* got Jacen killed! No more! If we continue to dither, the Jedi are all but dead. Besides, you *know* that they will attack Hapes eventually, it's a foregone conclusion. You can consider this as a thinning of their ranks."

Zekk exhaled shakily as he locked onto her glacial gaze. Any grief she may have been feeling from her brother's death was locked away so tightly that he couldn't even get a whiff of it. "Fine, but I'm doing this to protect the people of Hapes."
"Justify it however you want," Jaina muttered, clicking her comlink. "All ready Lowbacca, drop the jamming for only a little bit, we want them following us into the asteroid field. Tesar, you got the voids back up?"
"Thiss one is good to go," Tesar replied after Lowbacca's warbling affirmative.
In another instant, the ship began to rock again as Harrar's coralskippers renewed their pursuit. Using the Force to guide her, Jaina entered the asteroid field at full speed. Attempting to follow her, three of the coralskippers were immediately smashed to pieces as they misjudged the trajectory of the large space rocks. Another two ended up colliding, leaving only five pursuit fighters left. In the meantime, Harrar's clustership and his three Yuuzhan Vong corvette-escorts cautiously approached the edge of the asteroid field. Another two squadrons of coralskippers awaited on stand-by as the honor of the hunt fell to their first comrades.
After only three, long, stressful minutes, the creatures representing the five fighters crawled off the Yuuzhan Vong's sensor net, no longest registering.
Almost immediately, the remaining twenty-four fighters flew into the asteroid field. Though they were more careful than their predecessors, they still suffered casualties from the space-rocks as they approached the *Ksstarr's* position. They were fortunate. If it hadn't been for Harrar's yammosk tracking the *Ksstarr's* every move, visually sighting a Yuuzhan Vong vessel in an asteroid field would have been near impossible.
Just as the fighters began approaching the massive asteroid the *Ksstarr* was using as cover, disaster struck. The rock exploded violently, instantly shredding the nearest fighters and gunboats before they even realized what had happened. Others tried to maneuver out of the way, only to crash into other asteroids or each other. By the time those in the corvettes outside the asteroid field registered what had happened, they no longer had a fighter escort. Only seconds later, the *Ksstarr* blinked off their sensor grids once more. To the frustration of the Yuuzhan Vong crew, thought, they knew it was still out there. Harrar snarled at the sight, pounding a fist on the arm of his chair.
"Send in the others, they are to bring those *Jeedai* to me!"
With the message relayed, the three corvettes began to blast their way into the asteroid field, their plasma weaponry blazing.

Affixed to a nearby asteroid, the Jedi looked on.
"Having the villip mimic our ship was a neat trick," Ganner said with a chuckle, glancing back to the floating coralskipper hulks. "But we only had one. How are we going to get rid of these three, Goddess?"
Jaina rewarded him with a smirk that was borderline feral. "Watch and learn. Lowbacca, Tesar, dump our cargo and let them wake up when they reach their targets."
"Cargo?" Zekk blinked as the two responded with affirmative clicks. "You didn't think I went by those mines because it was the scenic route, did you?"
"You didn't," Alema whispered, a grin appearing on her face.
Jaina tilted her head with a matching grin. "I did."
Unbeknown to the crews of the three corvettes below, six, large dovin basal mines floated down towards them, powered only by their initial momentum. Though one was destroyed by a passing asteroid, the others bypassed the oblivious shielding crews. Suddenly, the *Ksstarr* reappeared on everyone's sensors, and the corvettes banked hard as they sped up to chase the ship. The actual sight of the stolen vessel, weaving in and out of the asteroid field, seemed to invigorate the warriors as the gun crews opened fire. But just as the *Ksstarr* passed by a series of larger rocks, the dovin basal mines woke from their Jedi-induced slumber.
The corvettes *own* dovin basals were thrown off by the sudden appearance of another gravimetric force and tried to correct the situation with jarring results. At the same time, the pull produced by the mines drew in the larger space rocks like a magnet. One of the corvettes sustained heavy damage, and the attached dovin basal mine tore a gaping hole in the weakened structure. Bodies flew out into space as the dying ship careened into another asteroid.
Another of the corvettes had an even worse time, falling prey to two mines instead of one. The gravimetric forces of the two mines wreaked havoc with its dovin basal, yanking the crew violently to one side of the ship, and then back the other way as the ship attempted to compensate. The members of the crew who had managed to avoid getting plastered into the cabin walls, could only stare in defeat as a dagger-sized asteroid flew towards the bridge of their doomed vessel. In seconds, the ship itself was consumed in a giant fireball.
The last vessel was the only one to survive Jaina's latest trap. By the time the crew managed to recover, however, the *Ksstarr* had once again disappeared. Cautiously, the captain ordered his crew to withdraw. Having already lost their sister-ships, the scarred warrior

had no desire to further involve himself in the Harrar's priestly troubles.
Not that it meant anything to the Jedi.
As the ship tried to reverse its course, large asteroid slabs seemed to maneuver themselves directly in its path. The Yuuzhan Vong corvette opened fire, obliterating the obstruction, only to have more of the asteroids float in its way.
"*Jeedai* tricks!" The captain yelled in alarm.
The space-rocks, which had only been blocking the ship's passage, suddenly accelerated towards the corvette. Try as the shielding crews might, the mini-singularities were no match for the tons of space-rock sent flying at the vessel. Like debris caught in a garbage compactor, the last of the corvettes was crushed between two massive slabs of rock. No one survived.
Back onboard the Yuuzhan Vong clustership, various voices were crying out in alarm. "Your Eminence, the *Ksstarr* has reappeared! It heads straight for us!"
"They do not have weapons' control, what does the *Jeedai* plan to do now?"
"Perhaps they mean to take us with them." The sensor officer said.
"Nonsense," Khalee Lah dismissed. "Though their ramming us would cause damage, this ship would survive. They would be killing themselves needlessly."
Through the viewport, the Yuuzhan Vong watched in bemusement as the *Ksstarr* braved the multitude of weaponry and continued its forward charge. Just when it looked like they'd collide with the bridge, however, it banked at the last moment and disappeared from view.
"Well?" Harrar looked to his yammosk keeper. "Are the *Jeedai* attempting to flee?"
"Unknown sir, we are no longer picking them up."
Harrar clenched his jaw and looked to his warrior counterpart. "Each of her tricks are becoming more costly than the last, Khalee Lah."
"She is a *Jeedai* and a twin," the warrior allowed. "But be cautious your Eminence, do not subscribe to the heresy that attributes power to this *Jeedai.*She is not even a pale shadow of Yun-Harla."
Harrar eyed Khalee Lah as he nodded noncommittally. "Of course. Yet thrice now she has deceived us. Jamming our yammosk, destroying our fighters, destroying our escorts, all without firing a single weapon. It will be hard to silence the rumors that will come out of this."
"Mouths are easily silenced, your Eminence. Once we have captured Jaina Solo, she will die a long painful death after renouncing her heresies."

"We have to find her first, Khalee Lah," Harrar motioned to the vastness of space. The *Ksstarr* was nowhere in sight.
As Khalee Lah opened his mouth to respond, a commotion occurred within the villip clusters.
"We have *Jeedai* on board!" Another crew member said in alarm, holding up a smaller villip. "The warriors are reporting four *Jeedai!* Jaina Solo is among them!"
"What? How!"
"They must have landed on our vessel and are using some trick to stay hidden."
"They've broken through!" Another voice on the bridge called out, nearing panic.
"Are you telling me that the hundreds of warriors on board cannot contain *four Jeedai?"* Harrar hissed in disbelief.
"No…yes…well…the warriors are reporting that the four are very formidable. A quarter of their number have already fallen."
"Where are the *Jeedai* headed?"
The officer double-checked with the villip, then swallowed. "Here, your Eminence."
Taking a step back in shock, but also slightly in fear, Harrar's eyes darted about the bridge. There were only a dozen warriors and a couple of shapers. If the stories about the *Jeedai* were even half true, then this token force wouldn't even stand a chance. Baring his teeth in a frustrated snarl, Harrar turned to his communication's officer.
"Contact those of Yun-Yammka, have them emerge from behind the sun and fire on our vessel."
"What?" Khalee Lah stepped forward in protest. "Have you lost your mind?"
"We have vowed to bring in or kill Jaina Solo," the priest said calmly. "She is heading here and we will die with them in the service to Yun-Harla. That is, unless, you believe you can stop her?"
With his pride as a warrior questioned, Khalee Lah stiffened. "Those of Domain Lah will never back away from a *Jeedai*."
"Then by all means," Harrar motioned to the bridge doorway. "If you and your warriors can stop the *Jeedai* it is more glory to you. If not, then we will die anyways, but at least we will take them with us."
His scarred face darkening at the prospect, Khalee looked to the yammosk operator. "The *Jeedai* have docked their vessel to this ship. If you want to live past today, you will find it and order the remaining warriors to kill any who have been left inside."
The technician nodded.

Khalee then looked to the warriors in the bridge. "Today we kill *Jeedai*! *Do-ro'ik vong pratte!"*
"Do-ro'ik vong pratte!" The warriors shouted in return, unwinding their amphistaffs.
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A storm of razor and thud bugs greeted Jaina, Tenel Ka, Zekk, and Alema as they rounded the corner. Vivid blades of light swept through the air and effortlessly cut a swath through the projectiles as the Jedi advanced. The narrow passageways prevented the warriors from overwhelming them with their numbers, no matter how many there were. Slowly at first, then with quickening steps, the Jedi broke into a light sprint as they barreled down the hallway.
The warriors met their challenge with guttural yells and charged as well. All were dispatched with lethal efficiency.
Despite this, no emotion could be felt from Tenel Ka. She was almost mechanical as she decapitated another warrior, before slicing the armor of another. Her braids whipped around as she focused on her new target, relentlessly battering the warrior until he fell under the onslaught of her blade. She was no longer human, she couldn't afford to be at the moment, but a whirlwind of death. Set forth not on vengeance, as she was well aware that vengeance couldn't bring Jacen back, but on the sole purpose of killing as many Yuuzhan Vong as she could. She would not allow them to inflict pain on anyone else.
Next to her was Jaina, a silent fury eradiating from the brown-haired young woman, growing with every warrior that fell. Jaina was beyond caring about the consequences. The war, which had cost her so much, had finally managed to take away a part of her family. Her twin. Her relief that it had been Anakin who had been saved over Jacen, was fast turning into a guilt that gnawed at her. There was no way around it in her mind. She truly had traded one brother for the other. At that thought, Jaina viciously maimed another warrior before jamming her lightsaber into his scarred face. These were the creatures who had killed her brother. It was only fair that she returned the favor.
Alema was a mixture of the two, with every Vong falling to her blade or blaster a victory for herself and her sister. She would honor Numa by killing Vong. It was the only solution that made sense to the Twi'lek. With cool, almost apathetic logic and a burning inferno of anger fighting on either side of her, Alema's own frustrations poured forth. She was no longer constricted by any regulations or laws. No longer had to hide or run. She would take the war to the Vong, kill every last one if she had to. Dark situations called for dark solutions. With every stroke of her own blade, she was reminded of the absence of her

sister's blade. Numa, who had fought and died alongside her. Now, now Alema had to kill Numa's share of Vong too. After all, they always looked after each other, always shared their burdens. Now that Numa was gone, taken from her, Alema had to bear that burden alone. Alone, just like she would now always be because of the Vong.
Zekk, in the meantime, grew increasingly worried about his companions as the fight intensified. Both Tenel Ka and Jaina had become near-impossible to read, their emotions completely bottled up. What did manage to leak through, however, was hardly reassuring. The two were also complete opposites. Where Tenel Ka was doing her best to kill any hint of emotion, Jaina was more or less drowning in hers. Alema was like a sponge, taking in the worst of both, and diving with glee into the sorrows and guilt of the others. All too quickly, the warriors fell back. Neither Tenel Ka nor Jaina nor Alema allowed them to do so without inflicting several more casualties.
Silence fell, and the deck in front of them was clear. The only sound that could be heard was the loud panting of the three women.
"Well, aren't we going to chase them?" Alema asked impatiently.
"The bridge is just one more deck up," Jaina said stonily. "We can take a short cut."
With that, she literally cut a hole in the ceiling membrane and leaped through it. The others had no choice but to follow suit. They appeared just as the warriors who had been retreating, emerged into view.
"Miss us?" Jaina hissed with a dark glee, drawing her blaster with her off-hand and stitching the tightly clustered formation with ruby-red bolts of energy. Once the energy clip was out, she hurled the weapon at the lead warrior and launched herself towards him.
With Tenel Ka, Alema, and Zekk joining the battle, the fight was quick. No sooner had the last warrior fallen, than the large membrane-like door that led to the bridge behind them, opened. Out came another dozen warriors, all much more heavily scarred than the ones who now lay dead on the ground. With these warriors, four shapers also emerged, the bulbous attachments to their eyes and arms pulsating disturbingly.
"Great, a real challenge," Alema said with a toothy grin. "I was beginning to worry."
"Any Vong is a dead Vong," Jaina quipped. "That's all that matters. Oh, look, a volunteer."
"Jaina Solo." Khalee Lah said as he stepped forward. "You are to surrender to me, Khalee Lah, or…"
"You know as well as I do that I won't surrender, Khalee Lah. But I will offer you the same courtesy, even if it's more than you deserve."

Khalee Lah's eyes narrowed. "At this moment, my men are searching for the *Ksstarr*. We know you are docked to this ship. It is only a matter of time before we find it and kill all inside."
"Another fool, another idiot soon to be dead," Jaina replied mildly, receiving a nod of agreement from Alema. "Why did I even bother to try?"
Khalee smiled darkly. "You will regret your insolence. Perhaps you will not be so cocky when we torture to death Anakin Solo in front of your very eyes. You were kind enough to leave your other brother for us so…"
Khalee Lah had no chance to finish his sentence as a stream of purple lightning forked out from Jaina's fingertips and struck him square in the chest. He was sent flying backwards into his men, twitching as the deadly electricity overwhelmed his nervous system.
"You were saying?" Jaina hissed, as the stream of lightning continued to pour out, unrelentingly from her fingertips.
"Jaina!" Zekk shouted in alarm.
But it was a full five seconds later before Jaina relented. By then, Khalee was a convulsing wreck on the ground, blood trickling out of his nose and ears.
"That felt better than I thought it would," Jaina said in a low voice, flexing her fingers.
In the span of another heartbeat, the remaining warriors and the shapers launched an all-out attack. The shapers were the first to act. The fleshy sacks attached to their arms peeling back and released a spray of needles, too numerous and small to block completely. Fortunately, the Jedi were already moving, dropping back down the hole in the floor Jaina had created. Before Jaina followed the others down, however, she hurled a belt, laden with the team's remaining thermal detonators at the warriors.
The explosives activated with a deafening roar. By then, Jaina had already dropped down to the lower level. The four Jedi, breathing heavily, saw and felt the detonation as a geyser of flame belched through the hole in the ceiling. The entire ship shuddered.
Wasting no time, Jaina leaped back to the upper level. Only the charred bodies of the Yuuzhan Vong warriors and shapers remained, some having been thrown into the bridge itself by the strength of the blast. She was soon joined by the others. Zekk gave a her worried look, but she ignored him.
"Let's finish this," Jaina said, her voice even as she strode towards the bridge.
"Yes, lets," Alema agreed almost eagerly.

"Tenel Ka, you can have Harrar," Jaina continued. "He's not worthy enough to challenge his goddess in combat."

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Harrar said nothing as he heard the four *Jeedai* step into view. Staring out into the asteroid field where the ruined remains of his escort floated about, he once again wondered whether or not the heresies could hold a hint of truth. If Yun-Harla truly wished Jaina Solo dead, then why had she survived for so long? Why, after saying that *she* was the goddess-personified, was Jaina Solo still breathing? Where the gods testing his faith, seeing how he would defend their name?

"Harrar, I presume." The one called Jaina Solo said poisonously.

Harrar closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Jaina Solo, you are very bold or very ignorant. This vessel is the sacred ground of Yun-Harla herself. You cannot possible hope to live after such a transgression."

Jaina looked around casually. "Well, I'm waiting. When is your goddess going to strike me down?"

Harrar calmly turned to face Jaina, his face betraying nothing. "At this very moment, the fleet of Yun-Yammka forms up and will fire on this vessel. We will die a death befitting of our natures. Then, we will see if your blasphemy holds true."

"You'll die first." Jaina nodded to a one-armed *Jeedai*, who activated her lightsaber in response.

Harrar unwound his tsaisi and at the same time also pulled out a coufee that was longer than most. Instead of it being dagger-sized, the blade was more the length of a small sword. "If I do die, it will be in the service of my goddess. What will *you* being dying for?"

Without a word, the red-haired *Jeedai* advanced with frightening speed. Harrar's tsaisi spat out a spray of venom, but she leaped over it and landed on the other side of the high priest. He was ready, though her flurry of strikes caused him to step back several times. The *Jeedai* was fast, nimble. Every time he struck out, she was already in another location. But, he could tell that something was driving this *Jeedai* beyond the usual bloodlust.

He recognized it clearly in the way she seemed to systematically attack him again and again. Younger warriors were often victims of their own rage and grief at the loss of a crèche-mate. Humans were even weaker than the Yuuzhan Vong, their emotions more pronounced. The frustrated snarl the *Jeedai* emitted as her blade narrowly missed his neck was all the evidence Harrar needed. As the fleet of Yun-Yammka gathered in the distance, he resolved to kill at least this *Jeedai* before he died.

Aiming to take advantage of her one-armed nature by striking with both his coufee and his amphistaff-like weapon, Harrar moved into the *Jeedai's* reach with a sudden burst of speed. His movement caused the *Jeedai* to rock backwards reflexively. At the same time, Harrar thrust his tsaisi forward, forcing her to defend herself or be then swung his coufee at her neck in a downward slash, thinking her defenseless.
To his alarm, the *Jeedai* allowed her momentum to continue to carry her backwards with the first attack. She bent over, her hand touching the deck as she did, causing his tsaisi to cut through the air above her body. Already committed to his follow-up attack, it was now Harrar who was the defenseless one as his second attack left him off-balance. Shifting her weight to one side, the red-haired woman swept Harrar's legs out from under him, unceremoniously dropping the scarred priest to the deck, face first. Though winded, he quickly rolled away as a heel of one of the *Jeedai*'s booted feet slammed into the deck where his head had just been. The red-haired *Jeedai* rose from her crouched position, her face impassive.
Her lightsaber reactivated, but she made no move to approach him, allowing him to return to his feet. Harrar grimaced, he had underestimated her and it had nearly cost him his life. They were not predator and prey, but two hunters squaring off against the other. With renewed respect, he and the woman circled each other, her emotionless grey eyes unnerving Harrar.
No warning was given as they both leaped towards each other at the same time.
Overhand, underhand, coufee to lightsaber, tsaisi to lightsaber. Harrar pressed on in a furious attack, intending to overwhelm his smaller opponent. Yet, the *Jeedai* matched strike for strike, showing no signs of tiring despite the onslaught.
Suddenly, the *Jeedai* stumbled on an uneven portion of the deck floor, and her lightsaber fell from her hands.
With a victorious laugh, Harrar swung his tsaisi and coufee at the same time for the killing blow. There was a snap hiss as the lightsaber reactivated, and a blinding wave of pain. Harrar blinked in confusion. What had just occurred? He looked to his opponent. For some reason she was towering over him, her eyes flashing with contempt.
Then, understanding came to him. She must have deliberately dropped her lightsaber, only to summon it with her *Jeedai* powers when he committed to his attack. But afterwards, what had happened? As his vision dimmed, he looked around and saw both his arms lying on the ground in front of him. Both his arms and the lower half of his body. Harrar looked to Jaina, even as he found breathing near impossible.

So, it looked as if Yun-Harla truly did favor this woman. A feeling of despair overcame him and he emitted one last, gargling yell before the red-haired *Jeedai*'s blade swung down and removed his head.

|* *|

The sight of their leader being maimed, before he was cut in two and then decapitated, had a silencing effect on the bridge. The remaining Yuuzhan Vong were not strong warriors and had no desire to fight the ones who had just bested their leaders. Fortunately for them, the four Jedi couldn't care less about them.

"Great," Zekk said softly. "But we should get out of here, that other Vong fleet will probably open fire soon."

As he spoke, flares of light appeared off in the distance, and the ship shook shortly after.

"Too bad," Jaina looked about the bridge. "I guess I'll have to settle for the Trickster after all."

"What are we going to do with the rest of these guys?" Alema motioned to the crew.

"Let 'em burn with the ship," Jaina shrugged, pulling out her comlink. "Ganner, do you copy?"

"*Here.*"

"Any trouble on your end?"

"Nothing Tesar, Lowbacca, and I couldn't handle."

The ship rocked again, and something exploded.

"I suggest you guys get back here though, real fast."

"We're on it," Jaina said, glancing at the other three. As one, they began to run.

Ganner's next comment surprised them all. *"Oh, and by the way, we've picked up several additional crewmembers."*

"Oh?"

"Yeah, a couple of Shamed Ones. They appeared when they heard Little Brother was aboard, I think. We're kind of running into a language barrier but I definitely recognized the word 'Anakin Solo' once or twice."

Jaina swallowed heavily. Anakin had mentioned the cult-like status he and Tahiri had developed due to their exploits on Yavin Four. Then again, these *were* Vong. "Are you sure they're safe?"

"I'm pretty sure they are. The warriors who boarded tried to kill them the moment they saw them. Why?"

"We *are* on the flagship of the head priest of Yun-Harla."

"Tesar is keeping an eye on them for now. You can question them yourself when you get back. Which I hope is soon."

A massive explosion rocked the entire ship.

"We'll be there in two," Jaina ended communications.
As the ship began to die all around them, Jaina, Zekk, Alema, and Tenel Ka felt a popping noise in their ears as the ship started to depressurize. Another explosion took out the ship's dovin basal, and along with it, the artificial gravity. Using the Force to sustain themselves, the four pulled themselves along the deck, occasionally propelling themselves through an open passageway. They just barely managed to reach the Trickster in time. One last hit caused a chain-reaction that buckled the rest of the clustership.
"Cut it a little close didn't you?" Ganner managed, his relief obvious as he helped them through what passed as an airlock.
"We made it, that's all that matters," Jaina replied quickly, sprinting to the cockpit. She and Zekk quickly slid into their seats and piloted the Trickster off the wreck of Harrar's vessel. A final volley from the other Vong fleet annihilated the clustership in a brilliant fireball.
"We've got skip's inbound," Zekk called out. "They'll get to us before we can reach the asteroid field."
"Ganner," Jaina called out, sending the Trickster into a spin. "Get one of our new Vong friends into the cognition hood. If they're here we might as well put them to some use."
"You're not planning to fight off the entire Vong fleet, do you?" Zekk said incredulously.
"If we're going down, we're going down fighting," Jaina retorted. "Maybe we can take another priest with us."
Meanwhile Ganner emerged with a smallish-looking Yuuzhan Vong female, her scar-less features a clear indication of her caste. Her lack of battle experience was clear at the complete terror she showed at the sight of the many coralskippers firing on them. Ganner pointed to the cognition hood, and the Shamed One's eyes bulged in disbelief. She yammered off a series of frantic sentences, shaking her head.
"Uh…I don't think it's going to work," Ganner said hesitantly.
Jaina clenched her jaw. "Well, somehow get the message across that if she doesn't use the blasted thing, we're all going to die a lot sooner than we want to."
Ganner blinked, then emitted a resigned sigh. Pointing to the Shamed One, then to the cognition hood again, he mimicked a starship exploding. "You don't put on, we go boom."
The Trickster jerked again as if to emphasize his point, the ship's damaged nature making it harder for it to compensate for the mind-bending turns Jaina was making.
The Shamed One repeated her string of sentences, looking pleadingly at Ganner. Ganner, for his part, couldn't help but shrug.

"Hey, I'm not the bad guy! Don't look at me like that! Jaina Solo is the one giving me orders. So-lo, do you understand?"
At the mention of the name Solo, the Shamed One glanced at Jaina with an intake of breath. She looked back to Ganner and rattled off, even faster if that was possible, another series of words.
"Ganner!" Jaina yelled, cursing when a plasma blast sent the ship spinning.
"It's not going to work!"
Just when Jaina thought her life would come to an end, multiple Force presences suddenly popped up all around them.
"What?" The Jedi all gaped in shock.
A coralskipper, burning apart from a direct hit of laser fire, swirled past the viewport before them. More explosions, but this time not from the Trickster.
"Kyp," Jaina exhaled.
"Durron?" Zekk said in surprise, likewise feeling the older Jedi.
Jaina's comlink crackled. *"You don't know how happy I am to see you guys. Hang tight for a bit and let my Dozen take care of things."*
"Kyp? What are you doing here?"
"You're kidding, right? Nearly everyone is awaiting your return."
Kyp's Dozen made short work of the remaining coralskippers, though one had fallen victim to a plasma burst. That didn't stop the others, however, from reforming and barrel towards the capital ships in the distance. Shadow bombs were released towards the largest of the ships, creating plumes of flame and debris as they detonated. The X-wings then closed in, quick and nimble. They fired burst after burst of lasers from their quad-cannons, sending chunks of coral flying off into space. A moment later, however, one of the Dozen disappeared in a ball of flame.
"So they still had grutchin in reserve," Kyp remarked over the com-line, sounding mildly annoyed. *"Alright Dozen, let's finish downing the big one. Launch the rest of your payload whenever you can and fall back to Stick's position."*
More shadow bombs were released, and the massive Yuuzhan Vong cruiser shuddered violently under the new onslaught. Though it wasn't dead, as Kyp had hoped, it was badly damaged enough that it began to withdraw behind its escorts. The remaining nine pilots of Kyp's Dozen regrouped around the damaged Trickster while the remaining Vong vessels continued to pull back.
"Jaina, is your ship still hyperspace capable?"
"Give me a moment," Jaina replied. She then switched frequencies. "Lowbacca, can this ship make the jump to lightspeed?"

Receiving an affirmative roar, Jaina switched back to Kyp's channel. "Yes. We're on course for Hapes. Both Anakin and Tahiri are badly hurt."
There was a moment's pause as Kyp digested the news. *"Care for an escort?"*
"Not that I don't appreciate the offer, but when'd you start working with other Jedi?"
To Jaina's surprise, Kyp replied with a laugh. *"Since your dad beat me over the head with my limbs and told me to grow up."*
"At least he partially got through to you," Jaina remarked dryly. "Setting course to Hapes, we'll jump on your signal."
"Understood," Kyp replied. *"See you planet-side, Solo."*
|* *|
"Your highness, Ta'a Chume.'
"What is it, Captain Livette?" The Hapan matriarch, exceedingly wealthy and powerful, eyed the younger female with barely veiled impatience. Ta'a Chume already had enough on her plate with her useless daughter-in-law and she was not in the mood for any more complications.
"We are receiving a message from the daughter of the Queen Mother. She and her Jedi companions are requesting asylum and immediate medical aid."
"Jedi companions?"
"Yes, we requested their identifications," Livette hesitated for a moment, but quickly continued. One did not waste Ta'a Chume's time. "Of the two that need immediate aid, one is Anakin Solo."
"Anakin Solo," Ta'a Chume said slowly. "The boy was at Centerpoint during the battle at Fondor, was he not?"
"Yes, he is the one."
"If my daughter-in-law does not grant them permission to approach, then do so. The arrival of these Jedi is a most fortuitous event."
"Yes, your highness."
Ta'a Chume waited until Livette had left before whirling to her favorite, Trisdin, who had been quiet throughout the entire exchange. Now that the Hapan Navy officer was gone, he straightened as Ta'a Chume approached him with a predatory gleam in her eyes. "Trisdin, judging from the fear you stink of, I assume the issue of succession has yet to be resolved."
"It is a shame your royal consort was only capable of fathering sons," Trisdin inclined his head in acknowledgement. "Your daughters would have made the most excellent of queens. Then again, you are still young and…"

Ta'a Chume let out a bark of laughter and patted his shoulder patronizingly. "You are an ambitious one, flattering me as you do. Just remember to keep your praise within the bounds of possibility. I have no desire to take another royal consort."
Trisdin shrugged, accustomed to such treatment. "It's a pity Isolder's daughter inherited her mother's temperament and culture."
"You give the Dathomiri too much honor calling what they have a culture," Ta'a Chume said with a dry laugh. "But still, Tenel Ka remains the best choice to succeed her mother."
"But she has no sense of duty! She refuses to serve Hapes, as you have done and continued to do. Her loyalty is towards the Jedi, not those who would be her subjects."
"There is the added difficultly, of course, of Teneniel wishing to give her daughter free choice. If the whispers are to be believed, this is quite a contentious point between her and my son."
"Then will it not be better to find Isolder a more fitting wife?" Though the words were treason, punishable by a quick and certain death, Ta'a Chume shook her head.
"The return of Tenel Ka and her Jedi companions make that unnecessary for now. Hapes needs a warrior queen, an image both she and her mother fulfill."
"But you just said…"
"Trisdin, you do amuse me so. Do you really expect me to bend to that witch's wishes and give her daughter a choice? I will not let this royal house fall due to the incompetence of some outsider."
"Teneniel *is* the Queen Mother."
"Yes, but even the Queen Mother is not all powerful. Now run along and prepare yourself for this evening's festivities."
Ever the pawn, Trisdin sauntered off under Ta'a Chume's watchful eye. He might have been her favorite, yet he was hardly necessary in the long run. Ta'a Chume was no longer the queen, true, but she was far from powerless. She had her own forces available to her, wielded enough political clout to force her weak-willed son to do as she pleased, and could even influence the Hapan law courts. Her allies did not come without a price, however. The large and very powerful anti-Jedi group started by her mother was gaining strength and popularity by the day.
The arrival of her granddaughter was much more of a relief to Ta'a Chume than she had let on. Ta'a Chume was fast approaching the time when she needed to reward the group or lose their support. The latter option was unacceptable, yet they were too large for her to destroy on her own. She disliked being at a disadvantage, so it was with a twisted

grin that Ta'a Chume looked up into the sky at the descending Yuuzhan Vong craft. Her granddaughter's ties to the Jedi just might come in handy after all.

|* *|

Whether it was a relief or not, the remaining trip to Hapes was uneventful. Though the Hapan Navy had initially been reluctant to let a Yuuzhan Vong ship through, Kyp's presence, and whatever powers that be, eased their passage greatly. Jaina couldn't help but sigh as the Trickster finally touched down.

"We've made it." Jaina slid out of the pilot's chair and stretched her arms.

"What are we going to do with the two Vong on board?" Alema bared her teeth slightly as she jerked a thumb towards the back of the ship.

"We'll worry about that later," Jaina shrugged. "I'm going to go check on Anakin."

"I'll make sure the Hapans have a couple of bacta tanks ready," Zekk called out after her.

When Jaina entered the room Anakin and Tahiri were being kept, a haggard and exhausted looking Chadra-Fan looked up in greeting.

"Tekli?" Jaina knelt by her brother's unconscious form and took one his hands in both her own. "How are they doing?"

Tekli rubbed at her eyes. What little rest the small healer had managed to get had been negated during the ship's encounter with Harrar and his people. "They should probably get into bacta as soon as possible. Anakin has several organs nearing failure due to his Force burn out, and I've managed to stitch up most of the wounds that weren't taken care of by the Force. Tahiri is in a similar, though less serious state. Fortunately, both will survive. Though, I'd advise against any more jostling before they get into bacta. Their lives at the moment are literally held together by medical thread and the Force."

Jaina exhaled. "But you said they'd live, right?"

Tekli smiled sympathetically. "Yes, thank the Force."

"Yes," Jaina said softly, concentrating on Anakin as she ran a hand through his hair. "And thank you, Tekli. They wouldn't have made it without you."

"There were so many others I could not save, I did not want to lose them too."

Jaina heard her own feelings reflected in the healer's words and bowed her head as she nodded in understanding.

"Jai-na," Tahiri's weak voice caused both women to look to her.

"Tahiri," Jaina quickly shifted her weight and bent over the smaller girl. "Don't try to move, you're badly hurt."

"A-a-nakin?"
"He's alive," Jaina moved to the side and motioned with her head. Tahiri weakly looked over, then seeing her best friend, let out a shaky breath of relief.
Three other figures appeared in the doorway to the room, Ganner and the two Shamed Ones who had left Harrar's ship.
Jaina arched an eyebrow. "Ganner?"
"Sorry, they wanted to talk with you," Ganner shrugged. "I'm not sure how much Basic they know, but I'm not getting through to them no matter what I say."
Jaina raised an eyebrow. "That's funny, that's what I feel like whenever I talk with you."
"Ouch, my ego just got…" Ganner trailed off when the female Shamed One behind him let out a gasp. He looked over his shoulder and saw that she was staring at Anakin and Tahiri. Then, as if remembering something, the Shamed One immediately turned her head away and closed her eyes. "Ummm…okay."
Tahiri, though barely conscious, saw the Shamed One and weakly let out a string of Yuuzhan Vong words.
"Tahiri," Jaina said anxiously. "Are you sure you're strong enough?"
Tahiri emitted a ghost of a smile. "I…I'll probably regret….regret it later. But knowing…you bunch…you've probably…scared those two silly."
Tahiri craned her head back to the Shamed One and repeated her sentence. On shaking legs, the small, scar-less woman approached. Tahiri called out to the other Shamed One, still behind Ganner, and soon both were kneeling before her with wide-eyes.
"Why do I get the feeling they see you as some sort of goddess?" Jaina asked, noting the almost reverent expressions on both Vong.
Tahiri conversed softly with both, who appeared to need a little bit of coaxing to answer. At the end of the conversation, Tahiri let her eyes fall shut, but she was grinning broadly.
"Tahiri?"
"That's because they do," Tahiri got out in one breath, flushing slightly in embarrassment. "The girl, Shaeri, is a novice of the 'scarred-Jedi' goddess cult of Yun-Shuno. The other is… Kadat, a seer of the 'bringer-of-life' divine cult of Yun-Ne'Shel. Apparently, the…the stories of Yavin Four, Yag'Dhul, and now Myrkr…are spreading rapidly. The fact that I… I identified…Anakin and myself with two of their deities on Myrkr…only amplified our status and made it easier for us to be accepted into their belief system."

"Wow," Ganner whistled, grinning at Jaina, Tahiri, and an unconscious Anakin. "Only teenagers and the three of you are already being worshipped. Keep it up and soon you'll be as popular as me."
Jaina looked nonplussed both at Tahiri's story and the recovery of Ganner's ego. Tahiri, in turn, let out a small laugh, though the blond girl immediately reached at her side in pain. While Jaina and Tekli fussed over her, Tahiri resumed her conversation with both Shamed Ones with halting breaths.
"Enough Tahiri," Tekli said sternly, shooting an evil glare at Ganner. "We didn't make it all the way to Hapes just to have you die of laughter."
"Just…just another minute," Tahiri martialed what little strength she had managed to build up. "Jaina… protect them. They chose to leave their people, knowing that they would be suspected by all, to be at our sides. They're completely devoted to serving Anakin and I because….because they see us as the…the salvation of their caste. I told…them to stay on the ship for now. It's the best way to…to keep them safe."
"Tahiri," Jaina said gently. "They could be lying. We did find them on the ship of Yun-Harla after all."
"Trust me…on this, Jaina." Tahiri murmured, feeling her consciousness leave her. "They…won't hurt…hurt…any…bo…dy."
"Tahiri?" Jaina said anxiously. "Tekli!"
The Chadra-Fan quickly looked over the young blond teen. After a few seconds, she straightened. "It's okay, she just pushed herself more than she should have," Tekli looked to Ganner. "Please see if there are bacta tanks ready. We need to transfer both her and Anakin as soon as possible."
Ganner nodded and left the room. Meanwhile Jaina evaluated both scar-less Vong before her. Both were knelt before and now facing their perspective 'cult deity' with reverence. Their heads were bowed and their hands out with their palms up as their mouths moved in silent prayer. Now that she could get a good look at the two of them, Jaina was shocked at how young they were. Kadat appeared barely older than herself, while Shaeri looked to be about Tahiri's age, their lanky forms thin from malnutrition and abuse. The one scar on Kadat's body was on the side of his face, and it looked suspiciously like a burn left behind by a lightsaber. Though Shaeri had no scars or implants, a metal diadem-like headband stretched across her forehead, with three wavy, lines carved into the center of the material. Jaina shook her head, unable to believe that she was about to trust a Vong, let alone two.

"We have two bacta tanks waiting outside the ship," Zekk's voice interrupting her thoughts.
"We'll be right there."
Using the Force, both Jaina and Tekli carefully levitated Anakin and Tahiri out of the Trickster. Alema, Tesar, Tenel Ka, and Ganner formed an honor guard behind them, while Zekk and Lowbacca ensured that the portable bacta tanks were in functioning order.
As they emerged into the morning light of Hapes' sun, the four columns of Hapan Royal Guardsmen sent out to greet them snapped to attention in respect, rotating on their heels to face the Jedi as one.
While Anakin and Tahiri were quickly placed into the bacta tanks, a blond, Hapan nobleman, with a guard escort of his own, approached.
Tenel Ka stepped away from her friends and bowed her head politely.
"Father."
Isolder's return smile did not quite reach his eyes as stopped in front of her. "Tenel Ka, this is a pleasurable surprise."
"My friends were injured, Hapes was the closest."
"Closest but not the best choice," Isolder responded in a low voice, embracing his daughter. "You should not have come here. Your grandmother is scheming again."
Tenel Ka took a step back. "Let her scheme. She knows full well the consequences if she attempts to harm my friends."
"It is you I am worried about, Tenel Ka," Isolder said. "There are whispers in the court that Ta'a Chume is preparing to make you the next Queen Mother."
"I have no intention of letting that woman dictate my future," Tenel Ka replied shortly.
"You may not have a choice," Isolder shook his head at her stubbornness. "I am giving you this warning daughter so you can *avoid* future troubles. If you would just accept your lineage and become Queen Mother, her planning will be for naught."
"I *have* accepted my lineage, father," Tenel Ka retorted. "I am a Jedi."
Isolder looked away sorrowfully, as if he had expected such a response. "So you are. Pray that your Jedi ways do not destroy you as it has done your mother."
Tenel Ka narrowed her eyes. "And how is my mother?"
"You would learn more if you spoke with her yourself. Perhaps, after seeing her, you will reconsider my proposal."
"Perhaps," Tenel Ka noted noncommittally.
Isolder patted her shoulder once, before walking past her and stopping at Jaina. "Jaina Solo, it is with great honor that I welcome you and your friends to Hapes."

"Thank you," Jaina inclined her head diplomatically. "And I thank you for providing the necessary equipment to save Anakin and Tahiri."
"It is the least we can do in our war against the Yuuzhan Vong," Isolder motioned and they began to follow the bacta tanks into the palace. "We received word only a short while ago that your parents and Master Skywalker are on their way to Hapes. In honor of their arrival, we are hosting a state dinner later tonight. I hope by then you and your friends will have had a sufficient enough rest and grace us with your presences."
"Of course."
"One thing, Jedi Solo. I already warned my daughter, but please be aware. Your arrival was welcomed all too warmly by Ta'a Chume."
"Hapan politics," Jaina summed up wryly.
Isolder gave her a knowing glance and nodded. "Hapan politics."
"What Solo trip to Hapes wouldn't be complete without it?"
I* *I
Tenel Ka wasn't sure what to expect as she opened the door to her mother's chambers. The sight of her mother, thin and frail, a far cry from the fearsome Dathomiri warrior she had once been, made the young woman's chest contract painfully. After her father's words, Tenel Ka hadn't really known what to expect. But seeing her mother in such a state caused her breath to catch in her chest.
Fortunately or not, Teneniel Djo was not alone. Though two of her relatives were caring for her, this wasn't necessarily reassuring. Tenel Ka wouldn't put it past her uncles and aunts to use ten, almost eleven, year old girls in the usual Hapan court intrigue.
"Taryn, Trista."
Both girls looked up as one, then bowed their heads politely.
"Princess."
"How does my mother fare?"
"She's better now that your grandmother has abandoned her attempts to kill her."
"Taryn!" One of the girls hastily chastised the other.
"What Trista? It's true."
"It doesn't matter. Ta'a Chume is the former Queen Mother, and you're addressing her granddaughter!"
As if remembering this, Taryn bowed fully. "I apologize for my rudeness, Princess."
Ignoring the bickering, Tenel Ka focused on Taryn's words.
"Grandmother has stopped trying to kill my mother?"
Looking guilty, both Trista and Taryn nodded.
"Do you know why?"

When both shook their heads, Tenel Ka glanced meaningfully at her ailing mother. "Please leave us then."
"As you command."
As the twin sisters closed the door behind them, Tenel Ka couldn't help but feel worried. Ta'a Chume didn't do things without a reason. Sadly, her abandoning of her assassination attempts was far more worrying than if she had continued them. It meant that Ta'a Chume already found a way to circumvent Isolder and Teneniel. Slowly, Tenel Ka approached her mother.
"It has been awhile," Teneniel said unexpectedly, though her gaze was still directed towards the open window.
Tenel Ka bowed her head as fresh tears formed but failed to fall. "It has been too long."
"You have lost the one you loved?"
At her mother's perceptiveness, Tenel Ka felt the tears finally free themselves. She weakly choked out a response. "That is a fact."
"This war has taken much from us," Teneniel's voice was distant, a hand absently touching her own stomach.
"Mother…" Tenel Ka took the final step to her mother's bedside in one long stride.
"You must be strong, Tenel Ka," Teneniel said softly, turning and gripping Tenel Ka's hand with a frail grip. She pressed an emerald ring into her daughter's hand, before letting her own hands fall limply in front of her. "Stronger than I was, if you are to survive this. Much stronger. You will lose more, a sad future. Forgive me, I cannot protect you from it. Please, give this to the next Queen Mother, I…I no longer can bear its weight."
"Mother," Tenel Ka said hoarsely, absently pocketing the ring as she rested her head on her mother's lap. Teneniel, however, made no move to comfort her daughter. The Queen Mother's expression was vacant, containing no hint of life. Her small form almost dwarfed by the blankets that shrouded her. Closing her eyes, Tenel Ka swallowed as she tried, and failed, to fight back her tears. "You have always been strong in my eyes, even now."
"You will lose much, as I have," Teneniel continued, not hearing her daughter.
With a sniffle, Tenel Ka gripped one of her mother's frail hands in her own and pressed it to her tear-dampened cheek. "I will not let you lose anything more, mother."
But Teneniel had fallen silent, her vacant gaze staring out the window. Tenel Ka made no effort to move. In the privacy of her mother's quarters, in the protection of her mother's lap, she had no desire to. As

cruel and as harsh as the galaxy was, Tenel Ka at least found some solace from it all.
Holding her mother's hand against her face, Tenel Ka rose and gently kissed her mother's cheek. If she could, Tenel Ka would banish her mother's pain with as many kisses as needed. But even the young Dathomiri warrior woman was not strong enough against her mother's grief. Instead, Tenel Ka rested her head back on her mother's lap and let her tears flow.
|* *|*
Alema Rar was restless. It's not that she didn't appreciate the silken sheets and the actual water shower just off her quarters, but neither were really to her tastes. She didn't outlive her sister to enjoy such luxuries, not when there were still Vong to be killed. Her lekku twitched in agitation while the blue Twi'lek abandoned her mediation attempts and stood. Pulling on a black vest and fitting both a blaster and her lightsaber to her utility belt, Alema left her room. The past few days had been eye-opening for her. A man she had once thought invincible, had nearly been cut down. His friend, whom she had dismissed as a little girl, had nearly gotten herself killed right along his side.
Alema shivered, remembering the abject disbelief she felt watching Tahiri's near-suicidal sprint to be at Anakin's side. Anakin's actions had been understandable. He had been mortally wounded and was sacrificing his life so that they might live. Tahiri, however, had had no such reasons apart from her feelings for Anakin. Feelings that Alema had always thought amounted to little more than a teenage-crush. But in that one moment, in her mad dash to save Anakin, Tahiri's raw emotions had shone far and wide in the Force.
Alema couldn't help but feel envious towards the younger teen, and a little guilty. Looking back on that moment, Alema knew that she would have ran, ran to let Anakin sacrifice himself. It wasn't that Alema was afraid of death, she had stopped being afraid of it since the death of her sister. Anakin's death would have simply been one more name for her to avenge, one more reason why she had to continue to live. She had already lost her master, her sister, what was one more name? It had been that moment when Alema had realized that the depth of Tahiri's feelings for the handsome, blue-eyed Jedi far surpassed her own.
Not that Alema had been under any delusion that she could ever steal him from Tahiri in the first place. The younger teen's barely concealed jealousy and annoyance had been Alema's constant source of amusement, as was Anakin's complete cluelessness to their private war. *Guess he can't be a know-it-all about everything.*Then again,

Alema sighed, now that Tahiri was fully aware of Anakin's feelings for her, it would make baiting her a whole lot harder.
Despite her light-hearted thoughts, reflecting on the full extent of Tahiri's feelings brought up a sobering reality for the young Twi'lek, she was truly alone. Even Tahiri, who was an orphan and had been shaped by the Vong, still had Anakin. Still had the love of his family.
It would have been better if he hadn't made it, Alema thought before she could stop herself. She frowned at that. It was true, though, wasn't it? At least that way she and the others could at least be united in their grief. At least Tahiri would be like herself, without anyone. But, it hadn't happened that way, Anakin had lived. Jaina had her brother, Zekk had his friend, and Tahiri had the one she loved. *But what do I have*? *What am I living for*?
Alema took a deep breath and looked around. She found herself at a lakeside, in the shade of an old tree. The smell of fresh grass blew through the light breeze, while water fowl created paths along the surface of the rippling lake. In the back, the steady trickle of a small waterfall provided a soothing rhythm. Yet, this idyllic scene was far from calming for Alema.
Sure she existed to slay Vong, but once they were gone, what was next? Her life was an empty one, and she had no desire to make it any fuller. That all ended with the death of her sister.
Alema felt a tickling sensation at the back of her mind and drew and activated her lightsaber in a single motion.
"Really, sister, is that anyway to greet me?"
Alema spun around, her jaw dropping at the image of her sister just above the waters of the lake.
"Numa?" Alema said hoarsely, her lightsaber dropped from her hands.
"Yup," the image of Numa nodded.
"But…how…why…?"
"I know you, 'lema," Numa said with a sly smile. "You're not going to give up are you? Avenging me? Making the Vong pay for what they did at New Plympto?"
"Of course not!" Alema nearly shouted. "They'll regret it, all of them!"
Numa nodded approvingly. "Now that sounds more like you. Those kiffin' monsters took everything from us. It's only fair we return the favor."
"Don't worry, I won't let you down."
"And what about after?"
"After? You know, when the last Vong falls to your blade?"
"I was wondering about that myself."

"Come on, sis. By then, you'll be that powerful Jedi we both wanted to be. Even Master Skywalker will have to acknowledge you. We both know that Anakin would never have made it back if you weren't one of the people covering the rear."
"So what? I'll just be a good little Jedi?"
"I'm just telling you to plan for the future, you know. You have to live both our lives now."
"But what if I don't..."
"Alema, I died. It would be completely pointless of you if you die too. You always were the stronger one, always had more potential than me. Now prove that the Force was right in taking my life and not yours."
Alema looked at the specter of her sister and swallowed. "I will."
"Good," Numa grinned. Her image began to fade.
"Wait!" Alema reached out towards her, taking a few, frantic steps into the lake.
"You'll be fine, sis. Make me proud."
"Numa!" Alema cried out, tears streaming down her cheeks as her sister disappeared once more. She sank to her knees, uncaring that the water was now soaking her clothing. "Numa." Alema whispered, head bowed.
After several long minutes past, Alema realized that someone was calling out to her. "Are you okay, Ms. Jedi?"
The grieving Twi'lek weakly turned her head in the direction of the voice. A woman wearing some sort of black armor with a light brown cape was standing on the lake's edge. Though she wore an odd, triangular headdress, a few strands of red hair fluttered free. From the color of her hair, Alema deduced that the woman was probably connected to the royal family in some way.
Alema worked her mouth several times and forced a smile. "I'll be okay. Just felt like cooling off."
"Is this yours?" The woman held up Alema's lightsaber.
"It is. Didn't want it to get wet, you know." Alema trudged out of the water with a heavy heart and soaked clothes.
"Weapons like these are beautiful, in their own deadly way."
"I wouldn't know," Alema shrugged, taking the weapon and glancing at it. "It's just a tool to kill Vong for me."
"We are fortunate to have people such as yourself, looking out for those unable to protect themselves, young Jedi."
"My name's Alema, Alema Rar."
"And my own is Brisha Syo," The woman said with a coy smile, the vertical scar over her right eye crinkling. "It is an honor to meet a Jedi of your caliber."

"There's nothing special about me," Alema said, clipping her lightsaber back to her belt. "The Force just didn't let me die when my sister did."
"But you can at least wield the Force," Brisha pointed out. "I have heard stories about it. Is it true you could crush the life out of your enemies with but a thought?"
Alema cocked her head to the side. "If the situation called for it, yes."
"Truly?" Brisha raised an eyebrow. "You are not afraid of the dark side?"
"If it helps me complete my task, allows me to save someone a second earlier, why hold back?" Alema shrugged.
"Why indeed. If I am not prying too much, who were you calling out to?"
"Just my sister."
"You still mourn her passing?"
Alema's smile turned bitter. "I never really got the chance to mourn. The Vong just aren't considerate at all."
"My condolences"
"Thank you, and thanks for picking up my lightsaber."
"It is not a problem, Jedi Rar." Brisha began to walk away.
"Wait, will I see you at tonight's dinner?"
The red-haired woman tilted her head to the side in thought before answering. "Yes, perhaps you will. I have a feeling things will become very interesting in the coming days."
|* *|
Jaina swallowed a lump in her throat, the soft, teal glow of the landing platform's lights making her appear paler than usual as her parents emerge from the Falcon. The arrival of her parents was no reprieve, though. It only served to remind her that she had failed her twin. That she hadn't brought both Anakin and Jacen back with her. Just facing them was hard enough. It had taken the combined efforts of Zekk, Lowbacca, and Tenel Ka to convince her to meet her parents. The final straw had been when Jagged Fel joined their ranks, insisting that she should treasure the family still alive and not the one she had lost.
The Clawcraft pilot had arrived a little while earlier with news of her parents' impending arrival and the fall of Coruscant. To say that the team of young Jedi had been shocked had been an understatement. The startled outcries and silent acceptance gave way to a wave of tangible relief with the knowledge that the Skywalker and Solo families had safely made it out. Yet the relief Jaina had felt upon learning of her parents' escape had only been fleeting. She now stared stone-faced at the ship. There was a hiss as the *Falcon*'s hydraulic pumps activated and lowered the landing ramp. In response, Jaina closed her eyes and

tried to reign in the multitude of feelings swirling in her chest; lest the other Force-sensitives next to her pick up on it.
"Jaina?"
She opened her eyes and saw her mom standing in front of her. "Mo… ther."
Leia wrapped her arms around her daughter. "Jacen will be alright, Jaina."
Jaina stiffened in anger and abruptly stepped out of her mother's arms. "How can he be? He's dead!"
"That's enough," Han said sternly. "Your mother says he's still alive, and I believe her."
Jaina turned towards her father. "I *felt* him die. My own twin."
"Who also happens to be my son," Leia gently reminded her. "I felt it when Anakin was near death, disappearing back into the Force. I can still feel Jacen, Jaina. Both of your brothers are still alive."
Jaina rocked backwards as if she had just been struck. Hope began to well up in her chest. But as quick as it arrived, she pushed it aside. "Are you sure you aren't imagining things? How come I can't feel him at all?"
"How come *we* can't feel him, Ambassador Solo," Tenel Ka added almost plaintively, her voice a soft whisper. Though her face was still emotionless, it was clear Leia's words had buoyed her spirit.
At this question, Leia's face fell slightly. "I'm sorry, but I don't have the answer to that. I only know that he is alive. With the war going on, that's enough for me."
"Try not to worry too much," Han forced a roguish smile towards the young Jedi. "He may have inherited Leia's brains, but he's got my stubbornness and will to survive. If you haven't figured it out already with Anakin's little stunt, us Solos are pretty tough."
Leia rolled her eyes. "Speaking of Solo-toughness. How are Anakin and Tahiri doing?"
Seeing Jaina still struggling to come to grips with her feelings, Zekk spoke for her. "Before Tekli took off for a much needed sleep, she said Anakin will have to be in bacta for at least another four days if we want all his wounds to heal. Tahiri's a little less roughed up so she can be out in two and a half depending on how things go."
Han's shoulders slumped as he exhaled. "And the other survivors? Alema and Ganner, right? They sleeping too?"
Zekk nodded once. "Well, Alema's sleeping anyways. Ganner said he was going to keep watch over Anakin, just in case. Isolder warned us that Tenel Ka's grandmother was plotting something."

Now it was Han's turn to roll his eyes. "You know, the charm of Hapan politics kind of wears off after the first visit or two."
Lowbacca emitted a small rumble, to which Han shook his head in amusement. "Or in his case, the first ten minutes. Leave it to our kids to come to a place where the politics are scarier than a galactic war."
Leia tugged on her husband's arm. "Well if you're done insulting the royal family, Han, we do have a son we should probably be seeing. Jaina, will you and the others accompany us? Luke won't be here until tomorrow morning."
Jaina shrugged. "Sure, it's not like we have anything better to do."
|* *|
Tenel Ka was perched on the rooftop, lost in her thoughts and memories. The sound of revelry wafted up from the ballroom below, evidence that her grandmother's 'welcoming' party was going well. Absently stretching her remaining hand up towards the sky, Tenel Ka searched through the Force whimsically. Jacen was still nowhere to be found. The place he normally filled within her heart still achingly empty. Yet, Tenel Ka could not discount Ambassador Solo's words. If his own mother believed him to be alive, then surely she could not be wrong. There was no greater bond in the Force than one between a parent and his or her child.
At that thought, Tenel Ka lowered her hand and cast her attention to the opposite side of the palace, to her mother. What she felt was unsettling. Teneniel's presence was little more than an echo, as if the once proud woman had become a void in the Force. Tenel Ka could only imagine the pain caused by the loss of so many in so short a time. The red-haired young woman let out a soft sigh. Her mother was in no condition to rule Hapes, that much was clear. The added threat of an imminent Yuuzhan Vong invasion only made the situation all the more dire. But, to become Queen Mother? To abandon her friends for a joyless life of politics?
At her latest musings, Tenel Ka's sense of danger spiked. With a whirl, she snapped on her lightsaber and deflected three blaster bolts in quick succession. A single, cloaked figure sprinted along the rooftop, dual blasters in hand. More red darts flew through the air, the blasters' suppression systems muting the sound. Tenel Ka blocked each of the bolts, then sent two of them back at her attacker.
Obviously surprised, her attacker lost his footing and began a deadly slide off the slanted roof. Both blasters were discarded as he frantically clawed at the tiles. Just as Tenel Ka's assailant was about to fly over the edge, however, he found himself being plucked out and suspended in mid-air. That was when Tenel Ka's assailant's hood fell off to reveal

that he was actually a she. In the pale light of the moon, Tenel Ka looked emotionlessly at her attacker.
"Hello cousin," Tenel Ka said mildly, keeping the other woman suspended over the edge of the building. "My aunt must really be desperate if she's willing to risk the life of her only daughter."
Despite the situation she was in, Tenel Ka's cousin reached for a holdout blaster and brought it to bear. The blaster, however, flew out of her hand and into Tenel Ka's. Tenel Ka simply regarded her relative with a raised eyebrow and discarded the weapon. Said relative snarled and reached inside her cloak yet again. The bright glow from Tenel Ka's lightsaber put a halt to her actions. Not many people would move with the point of the deadly blade hovering between one's eyes.
"I assume you are trying to kill me, and not my mother or father, because Ta'a Chume has spread the word that I will be the next Queen Mother?"
She nodded, and Tenel Ka's eyes narrowed.
"Then, the question is, what do I do with you?"
The suspended cousin looked at Tenel Ka in confusion.
"Normally, attempting to kill a member of the royal family is punishable by death. But I received some good news earlier, so I am feeling charitable at the moment. Tell me, do you want to die?" Tenel Ka applied the slightest use of the Force to compel her cousin to speak.
"No."
"Should you return without killing me, will my aunt kill you herself?" Tenel Ka asked, though she had already deduced the answer by the almost desperate way the younger woman had tried to kill her.
"That is how things are on Hapes."
"If I should let you live, will you try to kill me again?"
"I have no other alternative, princess."
"And if I were to give you one?"
"Princess?"
"At the moment, I have no intention of becoming Queen Mother. However, I will not put it past my grandmother to use my own mother as leverage to force me to take the throne. If I were to let you live, you would spend the rest of your days protecting my mother with your life."
"And what of my own mother, princess? She will not give up so easily."
"She was perfectly willing to throw away your life on a fool's mission. Should you take care of my mother, I will take care of yours."
"I…I accept then, thank you… cousin."

Tenel Ka deactivated her lightsaber. "I am not doing this entirely out of charity. Should any harm come to my mother while you live, you will wish that I had let you fall of this rooftop."
"Understood."
Tenel Ka guided her cousin back to the surface of the roof. "Good, after today, I don't ever want to see you unless my mother is at your side."
"Thank you." The younger woman bowed lowly, then drew her hood back up and scampered away.
Watching her cousin disappear, Tenel Ka clenched her fists. Ta'a Chume's machinations were slowly underway. What they were exactly, Tenel Ka did not know. She only hoped that she would discover what they were. Preferably sooner, rather than later.
I* Chapter End *I
A/N: So begins my version of Dark Journey. It will drastically differ from the book very shortly, as Anakin's survival has changed many things. Hope you enjoyed it.
7/7/12: Minor edits, word-choice adjustments.

ADA 3

Three
I**I
The Force had a sense of humor. Of that, Jaina was more than certain. It was a cruel, twisted sense of humor, but humor nonetheless. That could be the only explanation for her current situation.
Attending the diplomatic banquet put on by Ta'a Chume in a clinging, sleeveless, crimson gown that showed enough skin to make her father wince, was one thing. She preferred her flightsuit anyways.
But it was her seating arrangement that currently had her shifting uncomfortably.
Whoever decided to place her with Kyp Durron, Zekk, and Jag all at the same table needed to get spaced. Even with the Hapan Royal Orchestra playing soothing music in the background, the atmosphere at the table was extremely oppressive.
Maybe it was because there were so many couples happily dancing on the dance floor.
Or the fact that she could more or less feel the underlying emotions of the others at the table.
As one, all three Force-sensitives present opened their mouth to break the silence. As one, they closed it, looking at and encouraging the other to go first.

In that brief lapse, the non-Force sensitive took the initiative instead. "You look lovely, Jaina."
The object of his comment blushed, while the other two men raised their eyebrows.
"I'd feel better if I were in my flightsuit in the cockpit of an X-wing," Jaina replied, mostly to keep the awkward silence from returning, but also to cover the fact that she was desperately trying to control her flaming cheeks. Especially in front of the three of them.
"No doubt," Jag smirked knowingly, furthering Jaina's blush.
How he managed to catch her so off-guard, even without the Force, Jaina had no idea. She hated it, though it gave her a warm feeling she couldn't get rid of, even with her Jedi calming techniques.
Breaking eye-contact, Jaina glanced over towards the dance floor. Tenel Ka was dancing with another noble, and it was quite obvious the man was unable to match the warrior-princess' grace or fierce concentration. In the end, a misstep had him unintentionally stepping on Tenel Ka's toes. All it took was a single, raised, copper eyebrow from the Hapan princess, and the noble looked as if he would die from humiliation. Quickly excusing himself with an almost frantic bow, the noble beat a hasty retreat. To the surprise of those at the table, however, another nobleman eagerly stepped forward.
"You know, I think she's dancing that fast on purpose," Zekk commented after the new suitor literally stumbled to the ground after his fourth step.
"No, she tripped him that time," Jaina chuckled. "Probably didn't even want to wait for him to misstep."
"You think they'll start a support group?" Zekk joked, as yet another noble man became a victim of Tenel Ka's flawless grace.
Enjoying the lighthearted banter that reminded her of brighter times, Jaina nodded with a smile. "I can see that happening."
"This definitely takes me back to our adventures when we were younger."
"Really? What part?"
Zekk shrugged, suddenly looking embarrassed. "You know, just talking like this about one of our friends. Not having to worry about…well… you know."
Jaina's face went through a myriad of expressions. "Yeah."
The sound of a chair scraping the floor caused Jaina to glance back over her shoulder. "Kyp?"
"How 'bout a dance, Jaina?" Kyp said with a disarming grin. "For old time's sake. I used to be your master after all."

"Key words are 'used to be,' *Master* Durron," Jaina replied dryly. "But for old time's sake, why not?"
Accepting his hand, Jaina allowed him to lead her out onto the dance floor. Had she looked back at Zekk and Jag, she would have seen the both of them down the remainder of the wine in their glasses in one swig and promptly order refills.
"So, Kyp, what'd you want to talk about?" Jaina said matter-of-factly, her head resting on his shoulder.
"Can't I just ask a pretty woman to dance without having any ulterior motives?"
"Kyp."
"Fine, all work and no play for Jaina," Kyp shrugged, swaying with the music. "Rumor has it that you'll be hunting down Vong after Anakin recovers."
"Isn't that the job of Jedi this day and age?"
"True. But if you return to Rogue Squadron, you won't be given free reign."
"You want me to join the Dozen." Jaina stated, without question.
"I want you to join the Dozen." Kyp nodded. "And before you refuse me, think about what you can accomplish. What we can accomplish. I may have agreed to work with your uncle, but that doesn't mean I'll be at his beck and call. Someone has to do something about the Vong, and Master Skywalker is too bogged down in politics to act effectively. Join the Dozen and I'll also take you on as my apprentice."
Jaina regarded him with an unreadable expression, allowing him to spin her. "I'll consider it."
"You have other options?"
Jaina tilted her head. "If my mother is right about Jacen, then the Vong have him. I intend to get him back."
"You and what army?" Kyp remarked, dipping her and drawing her back up. The darkness shimmering in her eyes when their gazes met caused Kyp to shift his grip unconsciously.
"Me and whoever else ever considered Jacen their friend." The unasked question in her voice clear.
"So you're going to take Anakin and everyone else back into Vong space? Sounds like a challenge."
"Do or do not, there is no try," Jaina quipped.
"You would need support, a distraction, if you don't want the entire Vong fleet after you."
Jaina smirked and leaned forward so that her forehead was touching his. "You offering, Durron?"

"You want me, Solo?" Kyp returned her arched eyebrow, holding her gaze.
The music ended, and Jaina blinked first. She released his hand and took a step back.
"Think about it," Kyp said with a brief nod of his head.
As Kyp disappeared into the crowd, Jaina felt Tenel Ka approach silently from behind. "You seem pensive, Jaina."
Jaina turned to her friend and cocked an eyebrow. "And you seem beat. Although, those guys look like they've seen a couple of rounds with a rancor."
Tenel Ka glanced mildly at the group of thirty or so Hapan noblemen behind her, all looking rather worn down and haggard. Some were favoring one leg or another, while others were busy wiping the beads of sweat that ran down their faces in rivulets. At her narrow-eyed assessment, most lowered their gaze, while others suddenly found something else to do. "That is a fact."
"And you let them live?"
"The state of politics on Hapes is still aggravating," the red-haired princess admitted, leading them out of the main hall and into one of the palace's many gardens. "But, contrary to popular belief, I do not have a trophy room full of the heads of spurned suitors. If that was so, I would need more than one room."
Jaina halted in her tracks and blinked.
Tenel Ka wryly looked at her over her shoulder. "That was a joke."
"I don't think I'm ever going to get use to your sense of humor," Jaina said with a shake of her head.
A ghost of a smile appeared on Tenel Ka's face. "What is bothering you, friend Jaina?"
"Nothing much," Jaina said, with a shrug. "Just trying to figure out how to make it through the next day, like everyone else, I guess."
A silence settled between the two of them. Both still trying to regain their bearings after everything they had been through.
Tenel Ka was the first to speak again. "I…I have a question for you."
"Go ahead."
"Do you believe your mother when she says that Jacen lives?"
Jaina, who had been in the process of sitting down on a stone bench, nearly missed her target. "Tenel Ka?"
"Do believe Jacen is alive?" Tenel Ka repeated softly.
"Why…why are you asking me?" Jaina swallowed.
"Ta'a Chume wishes me to become the next Queen Mother," Tenel Ka replied, stiffly staring out into the sky. Tears, unshed, caused her grey eyes to glisten in the faint light from the palace; the only indicator of

the turmoil the strong warrior woman was feeling. "Before I can even consider taking it, I…I have to know."
Jaina focused her gaze on the flame of a nearby lantern, fighting back a swell of emotion. "I'm not the best person to ask, Tenel Ka. What if he is?"
"I would find and bring him back," Tenel Ka whispered hoarsely. "I would bring him back and never let him out of my sight again."
Jaina whipped her head around to look at her friend in shock. Though she had been aware of Tenel Ka's feelings for Jacen, actually feeling the extent of it through the Force was startling. "You love my brother."
Tenel Ka's grey eyes widened, as if she suddenly realized just how low her defenses had become. Working to wet her dry mouth, Tenel Ka nodded once. "I…I have always loved him."
"Always, huh?" Jaina smiled gently.
"Even if he does not feel the same way," Tenel Ka closed her eyes at the thought. "I cannot take the Hapan throne if he is in the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong. How could I? Anchor myself here while he is in torment?"
Jaina looked down at her own clasped hands and swallowed. "I may not be able to feel Jacen anymore, but I have to believe in my mom. If she says he's still alive, then he is."
Tenel Ka exhaled shakily. "Thank you, Jaina."
Jaina simply shook her head and sighed. "What is it with my brothers? Anakin has Tahiri so in love with him that she's willing to sacrifice herself with him. And here you are, willing to give being queen of sixty plus star systems to go after Jacen."
Tenel Ka emitted a rough laugh, her features not as tense as they had been only seconds ago. "And you, Jaina Solo. Do not think that I failed to notice the affections that Zekk, the lead Clawcraft pilot, and Master Durron were showering you with, tonight."
"What? They were not!" Jaina stammered, her cheeks glowing despite her denial.
"Not every woman can say that they have two Jedi and a descendant of the Fel family line at her beck and call."
"Tenel Ka! It's *not* like that!" Jaina managed to hiss out between clenched teeth.
"If you insist."
Jaina groaned "Zekk is just a longtime friend, Kyp is just my former master, and Jagged, is, well…Jagged."
"It is as you say," Tenel Ka allowed with a knowing smile. "Now come, we must return to the main ballroom before we are missed."
"You're that eager to return to your prospective suitors?"

"I will simply tell them that I have no intention of taking the throne until I've rescued the man I love from the clutches of the Yuuzhan Vong. That should make my grandmother happy."
"You could always make it a competition," Jaina pointed out.
Tenel Ka looked at Jaina in confusion.
"You know, like a reverse of those damsel-in-distress holo-vids. The man who successfully rescues Jacen from the Vong can have an opportunity to become the future prince-consort. You help Hapes trim down on the number of nobles, and increase the chance of Jacen being rescued in the process."
Tenel Ka's eyes were alight with amusement. "If they continue to believe the stories Ta'a Chume concocts, then I just might."
|* *|
High Priest Naazar stood aboard the flagship of Yun-Yammka, the *Warrior's Calling,* lost in thought as he stared at his assembling fleet. With the failure of the priests of Yun-Harla, the mission to capture and kill the *Jeedai* Jaina Solo and her younger brother now fell upon his shoulders. Though he should have been delighted that he now had the honor to capture those who blasphemed the names of the gods, the fact that Yun Harla had chosen the *Jeedai* Solo over her own high priest troubled him greatly. Out of all the *Jeedai*, it was the Solo children who were most vexing. Why did the gods continue to allow them to live?
"Your Eminence," the voice of the commander of his warriors, Khadal Lah, interrupted him from his musing.
"What is it?"
"Are you certain you need this many ships to deal with the *Jeedai?* The Hapan people have no fleet, and the nearest infidel forces will never be able to arrive in time to aid them." As the warrior spoke, more ships emerged from hyperspace, joining the already impressive gathering of ships around the *Warrior's Calling*.
"Tell me, Khadal," Naazar said casually. "When tracking dangerous prey, do you approach it with only your hands, or do you bring with you a true weapon?"
"I do not see the relevance."
"Neither did Harrar or your cousin," Naazar said, his massive, scarred form making Khadal look nothing more than a child who had yet to undergo any initiations. "I am of the sect of the warrior god, Yun-Yammka. Where those of the Deception sect relied on trickery and clever minds, we take pride in our skills in direct combat. The skills of no warrior can match up against our people. Even the Supreme Overlord himself uses those of our sect as his personal bodyguards. The *Jeedai* have made a mockery of the names of Yun-Harla, of Yun-

Ne'Shel, of Yun-Shuno, and they *will* be made examples of. If I have to use the firepower of this entire fleet to turn the Hapes home-world into a ball of ash, then so be it."
"Still, the fleet already at your disposal is nearly half of what we brought to bear at the infidel capital. Surely you are aware of the stories already being spoken about you and the gods?"
"Stories?"
Not recognizing the note of danger in the high priest's voice, the warrior continued. "Yes, your Eminence, the stories speak of how you fear the Solo children. How, even though the enemy is small, you ruin the name of your sect, of your god, by ensuring such an overwhelming victory for yourself. We are Yuuzhan Vong, warriors until the end. Not some cowering politician or shaper fearful of defeat!"
"You are fortunate, Khadal, that you are your uncle's favorite," Naazar said with a deathly calm. "Just because we are Yuuzhan Vong does not mean the gods will smile upon us if we needlessly throw our lives away due to our arrogance or pride. I will take no chances when it comes to the *Jeedai*. When the Solo children are in our grasp, begging for death, those who spread such tales will then feel the bite of my amphistaff. Now go and await the remainder my reinforcements. When they arrive, we will begin our invasion and the destruction of the star cluster these infidels call Hapes."
"As you command."
Naazar could see the sneer the warrior had failed to keep hidden, but did not comment on it. He had enough problems already without worrying about the leash placed on him by Tsavong Lah. Turning to resume his study of the stars and the ships outside the viewing port, Naazar's thoughts once again took him to the *Jeedai*. Everything he had learned since emerging from the crèche was challenged by their mere existence. Though he despised the stories that bit at his name, he was not so arrogant that he did not recognize the truth in them. His hand tightly gripped the railing in front of him. He *was* afraid. That was a feeling no priest who serves Yun-Yammka, should ever know. One by one, more ships arrived.
He would flood the Hapes cluster with them. Drown the *Jeedai* in his power. They shouldn't exist, couldn't exist, if everything he learned about the gods was true. If everything in his sixty years of life had not been a lie, he had to erase them. As he clenched his fists and jaw in frustration, he was unaware of the lone warrior standing in the doorway behind him.
Khadal scowled at the cowardly High Priest; his own hands clenched, but for an entirely different reason. The warrior was unable to believe

that his uncle would leave such an important task to someone who was obviously so weak. With Naazar's reluctance, it was apparent that he would most likely end up taking matters into his own hands. In doing so, he, Khadal Lah, would bring himself, and the Yuuzhan Vong people as a whole, great honor.
Smirking, the warrior silently left the room. Yes, he could see it already. All the accolades. Even a meeting with the Supreme Overlord himself. He would do what countless Yuuzhan Vong commanders had failed to do, and once again remind the galaxy of the fearsome name of Domain Lah.
|* *|*
Blinking several times, Anakin looks about as he finds himself on a strange world. It is Coruscant, but it isn't. A Yuuzhan Vong World Ship is high in the sky like an omnipotent moon, and the towering, burnt out skyscrapers are covered in some sort of biological material. Animals not native to the metropolitan planet scurry about. While Yuuzhan Vong warriors sit around campfires throughout the skyways.
For several tense moments, a warriors walks directly towards Anakin; but when the warrior gives no indication that he even sees the young Jedi, Anakin relaxes. Then he blinks again. The hand he had instinctively held up to ward off the warrior's advance was pale blue and definitely translucent. A quick check of the rest of himself reveals that his entire body is in a similar state.
"Okay," Anakin mutters, examining his hand again. "I'm either dead or the Force is doing something weird again. Let's vote for number two and hope for the best."
A scream of pain echoes from a nearby passageway. It is a voice Anakin recognizes all too well.
"Jacen?"
The screams continue, and Anakin sets off in a sprint down the ramshackle corridor. The path twists and turns several times, taking him deeper and deeper towards the depths of Coruscant. Organic debris coating the ground makes the durasteel floors slick, but it does little to impede him. It is as if he has no physical presence. As if he truly is a ghost. The screams stop, and for several heart clenching moments, Anakin fears that he is too late.
Not even winded after his marathon sprint, Anakin looks wildly at the several possible pathways available to him. Trusting the Force, he chooses a path that takes him even further down into Coruscant, towards its very center.
The screams resume, and Anakin runs and runs.

Finally, the pathway opens up to a balcony of sorts, overlooking a deep pit. Peering over the ledge, Anakin sees his brother strapped down to a Yuuzhan Vong device of some sorts that is connected to a floor matted with organic material. The very walls of the pit writhe as if they were alive, while Jacen thrashes in his restraints. There are two other figures present, Nom Anor and the strange Fosh creature Vergere.
"Enough, he is ready," Vergere says softly.
Nom Anor inclines his head and deactivates the device that holds Jacen. Weakened, the young man falls to the organic mat on the floor, breathing heavily.
"Leave us," Vergere orders the Executor. "I will summon you when I am done with this one."
"As you wish," Nom Anor bows his head.
Once he is gone, Vergere kneels by Jacen's curled up form.
"Do you see now?" Vergere croons. "There is no good or evil. No dark or light. There is simply the Force. What you did on the seedship is proof that your mind is beginning to understand this. The pain you just felt is nothing compared to the pain of an entire galaxy, is it?"
"I…I am a Jedi…my name…is Jacen Solo."
"Jedi, Sith, they are only titles given by those who truly do not understand the Force," Vergere mutters into his ear. "People who fear its full power, its potential. But you, you do not have to be afraid. I am with you. I can make your pain go away. I can chase away your fears. You can be so much more than you are now, if only you open yourself up to the possibility of a unified Force. Only then can you truly do the things you wish you could do. Only then can you continue to protect your family."
"My family," Jacen rasps, gripping Vergere's arm as he staggers to his feet.
"Yes, you couldn't protect your brother and sister using only your 'Jedi' powers could you? You ended up here, in the middle of the Yuuzhan Vong army."
"I…I…"
"Shhh…I know," Vergere whispers soothingly. "And I promised to help you. The remains of the Jedi Temple are nearby, perhaps, if you truly want answers, you should start your quest there."
"But the Vong…"
"They will be of no consequence. Now come, Jacen Solo. Let us see if you still claim to be who you are once we are done."
The scene before Anakin becomes blurry, fading away like an image from a bad holo-transmitter. Wide-eyed, Anakin reaches out towards his brother, but to no avail.

Everything was gone and Anakin was once more back in whatever grey-black realm he had started out in.
Anakin!
Tahiri?
You stupid gundark! Where did you go! One moment I can feel you here and the next you're gone!
Sorry, I think I was on Coruscant.
Coruscant?
Yeah, but it was all Vongformed. I saw Jacen there.
Your brother?
Yeah, he was with Vergere and Nom Anor. I think they had him in an Embrace of Pain.
Ouch
We have to save him.
We have a little problem of being almost dead.
A minor problem. I'm Anakin Solo, even being almost dead won't stop me.
I knew we should have kept you away from the younger Jedi. All of their hero worshipping went straight to your head.
I am serious though, I think the Force was warning me, us.
Warning you? What? Why?
If we don't get to Jacen soon…I think the entire galaxy will come to regret it.
|* *|
Though she and the others had been discussing plans to rescue Jacen, even if they currently had no idea where he was, Jaina Solo frowned as she suddenly felt her mother's disquiet; loud and clear through the Force. After everything they'd been through, it was hard to imagine what could unnerve the former senator and survivor of countless near-death experiences so early in the morning. The only things that immediately came to Jaina's mind had to do with the wellbeing of family or friends. A quick check on her brother, and then Tahiri, revealed that neither were in any trouble. In fact, it felt as if the two were on the verge of regaining consciousness. She could also feel her uncle approaching the planet, unharmed.
The fact that Jaina was with her Force-sensitive friends meant that her own unease did not go unnoticed. Ignoring the questioning gazes she was receiving from the others, she stood. Then paused. Whatever had surprised Leia was now causing anger and disbelief.
"Jaina, what's wrong?" Zekk frowned, rising along with Tenel Ka.
Jaina shook her head. "Not sure. Just a bad feeling. Where are the others at the moment?"

"Ganner should still be sleeping, and Tekli iz with Tahiri," Tesar responded, still seated but tilting his head curiously. "Thiz one would like to repeat Zekk's question."
Jaina didn't respond, choosing instead to turn around and walk briskly in her mother's direction. She heard the others follow, but ignored them. Following her mother's presence, Jaina found herself in front of a rather large conference room. Several raised voices could be head through the closed doors.
"I don't care if you second rate politicians see this as a 'just' thing, my boy's not even out of his bacta tank yet!" Shouted a voice that Jaina recognized as her father's.
"Nevertheless, sir, his participation in the destruction of our fleet at Fondor is undeniable."
"He didn't even fire that blasted thing!"
"But he was instrumental in its activation."
"Trisdin, surely you can understand our concern," Leia's voice, slightly raised, took over. "Our son nearly died destroying a Yuuzhan Vong weapon that may have turned the tide of the war."
"If my understanding of the mission is correct, this 'weapon' would have only targeted Jedi. The only thing your son was doing was saving himself and his follow Jedi at the expense of the safety of the commoners. Surely *you* can see the consequence of his actions? We have more refugees than ever, and the economy of Hapes is at its breaking point because the Queen Mother refuses to stem the tide. His mere presence on Hapes endangers us to no end because we lack an actual fleet to protect ourselves."
"So what? Putting him on trial is going to make everything better?"
"It will buy us some time at least."
"Time, time for what? To sell out your people and make them slaves to the Vong?"
"At the very least, it will show the Vong that not everyone will bend over backwards for an Order whose presence has only exacerbated this war. If it were not for your son, hundreds of thousands of Hapans would not have needlessly lost their loved ones."
"And what does the Queen Mother have to say about this?" Leia spoke up once more.
"The Queen Mother is currently in no state to contest this. Her own support and popularity is low enough as it is. Coupled with the fact that no one knows of her diminished mental state due to Ta'a Chume's intervention, it would be most unwise of her to do anything else *but* support this trial."

At that, Jaina finally had had enough and used the Force to wrench the doors to the room open with a resounding crunch. All eyes in the room turned to her. Breathing heavily, Jaina glared and took in the scene before her. Standing on one side of the room was Ta'a Chume, a pompous looking man Jaina assumed was Trisdin, and several Hapan Royal guardsmen in red outfits. Jaina's own parents were on the opposite side, both with their jaws set and their eyes blazing.
Tenel Ka leveled a glare at Ta'a Chume. "What is going on, *grandmother*?"
"Politics as usual, *granddaughter*," Ta'a Chume said, with a hint of aloofness. "There is a very vocal section of Hapan nobility that is furious with the fact that our limited medical facilities are being used to heal the Jedi, Anakin Solo. Coupled with the fact that our intelligence reports a massing Yuuzhan Vong fleet at Obroa-Skai, well, I do not have to explain any more, do I?"
"No, Ta'a Chume, you do not," Tenel Ka's voice was positively glacial.
Then, as if in an afterthought, Ta'a Chume held up a finger. "I understand that you and your friends wish to search for that missing Jedi. What was his name? Oh yes, Jacen Solo. Am I wrong?"
Tenel Ka's hands clenched tightly, the only outward sign of emotion of her otherwise stoic demeanor. "You are not wrong."
"Well then, if he is indeed alive, you had best hurry. After all, the Yuuzhan Vong are known for experimenting on their prisoners, are they not?"
Both Jaina and Tenel Ka sucked in a sharp breath, and Tenel Ka took a step forward. Before she could say anything, however, Leia moved between the two women.
"That's enough," Leia said with a deathly calm. "I understand that there are certain laws and procedures that must be followed on Hapes. If you wish to put my son on trial, know that we will use every resource and connection we have to defend him."
"Thank you for respecting the laws of Hapes, Ambassador Solo," Ta'a Chume inclined her head. "It is unfortunate that the Queen Mother is currently in ill health. If she were in her prime, surely she would have been able to put a step to this senseless move by a small group of scared nobles."
"Yes, it is unfortunate indeed," Leia said darkly.
Trisdin stepped forward. "It is truly regrettable, but we also have to detain the Jedi Tahiri Veila as well."
This time it was Jaina who voiced her objections. "What? Why?"
"It has come to our attention that she had been captured and changed by the Vong, and that no long term study or comprehensive medical

examination of her has been conducted since then. Her detainment will be as much for her safety as it is for our own. Additionally, she will also be used as evidence in the trial of your brother."
"Evidence?"
"Yes. In addition to the deaths he caused at Fondor, he is being charged with collaborating with an enemy of the Hapan state."
"That.…that…that's just plain ridiculous!" Jaina snarled. "Which enemy?"
"Why, the Yuuzhan Vong, of course," Trisdin replied looking down at a datapad. "Not only does he make alliances with their soldiers, if our information is correct, he has also started up a cult-like following within their ranks. He has even gone so far as to overlook the adjustments they made to the Jedi Tahiri, ignoring the fact that she now thinks and can speak in their language."
The silence was deafening as Trisdin, Ta'a Chume, and the royal guards filed out of the room. But as their words caught up to her, Jaina's eyes flashed dangerously. Tenel Ka reacted quicker. Bypassing a startled Trisdin, Tenel Ka strode directly in front of Ta'a Chume, stopping the former Queen Mother in her tracks. Standing toe-to-toe, Tenel Ka's stormy grey eyes burned into Ta'a Chume's equally flinty gaze. "You will regret bringing my friends into this, Ta'a Chume."
"You mistake me, granddaughter," Ta'a Chume replied evenly. "I have done nothing of the sort. Now, do you not have another Jedi that you wish to save?"
The dismissal in Ta'a Chume's voice was clear, but Tenel Ka did not back down. In an even softer voice, the Hapan princess hissed out a warning. "I will *not* let you use my friends to dictate my future."
"That is not a choice you have, Tenel Ka. What I do is for the good of Hapes," Ta'a Chume replied in an equally venomous whisper. "If I must sacrifice a life or two so that Hapes remains strong, then so be it. But, do not think for one moment, Tenel Ka; that my plans revolve solely around you. If *you* do not grow up and become the Queen Mother we both know you will be, then I will simply have another. Hapes needs a warrior queen, and your friend Jaina Solo is suitable enough."
Tenel Ka took a step back in shock. "She is not of royal blood."
"But your father is," Ta'a Chume said. "And your mother is in such ill health recently that her death, should it occur, will not come as a surprise to anyone. The only option you truly have, granddaughter, is who lives and who dies before you take the throne. Will you forfeit the life of your mother and let Jaina Solo take the throne, all for your foolish pride? She no doubt will, in order to save the life of her brother. Or will you forfeit your life as a Jedi and that inconsequential Jedi boy,

saving your other friends, your mother, and all of Hapes? The answer is rather obvious, don't you think?"
|* *|
"Got all of that, fearless leader?" Alema said wryly, holding up her comlink for Anakin to see. Jaina's message would have stunned Alema, had the Twi'lek not already been in a state of shock from Anakin's unexpected return to the waking world.
"Maybe I should have stayed unconscious?" Anakin's voice came through the bacta tank's comm-system with a metallic tint.
"Too late for that," Alema said, her lekku twitching negatively. "So, you have a plan?"
"Alema, I just woke up five minutes ago."
"And your point?"
"That's not good enough?"
"Solo, you got me and the others out of Myrkr while dying, so my expectations are kind of high at the moment. How's your other half?"
"My what?"
"Blond, possessive, speaks Vong every so often?"
Anakin closed his eyes for a moment, then winced. "She's awake as well. Apparently, she heard Jaina give the same message to Tekli."
"And she's not tearing down walls to get to here?"
Anakin shook his head. "I guess her med-center is closer than this one. They already have guards posted. Oh, and they just brought in a ysalamir"
"You could sense it?"
"More like the absence it created, Vongsense is useful."
Alema shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Well, if they have guards there, they'll probably have them here too. So, you have a plan yet?"
"Jaina said that they'll be using Tahiri as evidence against me?"
"Yes," Alema said slowly.
"Okay…" Anakin said, almost reluctantly.
"Solo?"
"I have a plan, but you'll be taking a huge risk, and pretty much everyone will hate you or think you've gone dark."
Alema blinked. "And this is Plan A?"
"You wanted a plan," Anakin smiled faintly. "It's the best I could come up with in the minute or so since you've asked for one. Since I'm stuck in this tank for the next couple of days, most of it will be up to you."
"So what do I have to do?"
Anakin told her what he had in mind, and Alema stared at him blankly.
"You do know that your sister recently fried a Vong with lightning?"
"She did?"

"Yes," Alema nodded. "And Warrior Girl split a Vong high priest into quarters."
"Oh?"
"Not to mention you're friends with a Wookie and a certain blond teen who would kill me if I did what you planned."
"Hence huge risk to yourself."
"You sure about this?"
"I know it's a lot to ask, especially the first bit, but..."
"No, it's okay," Alema's expression became unreadable as she smiled mysteriously at him. "This isn't like that time on Myrkr, this is something I can do."
"Alema," Anakin blinked.
"Take care of yourself, Anakin," Alema said, winking before she turned and sauntered to the door. "I'll need you to fend off our friends when this is all over."
I* *I
Before the *Lady Luck*even touched down, the Grandmaster of the Jedi Order, Luke Skywalker, could feel the anger and frustration irradiating from his niece, sister, and nearly all the other Jedi on Hapes. If that wasn't a concern enough, the darkness emanating from Jaina definitely worried him. She hadn't gone completely dark yet, he was sure of it, but it was clear she was flirting along the fine line between dark and light.
"Something wrong, Luke?" Lando asked, noting the slight tension in Luke's facial features.
"Probably," Luke muttered.
"You know, old buddy. Trouble seems to follow your family no matter where they go."
"I can vouch for that," the voice of Lando's co-pilot added. "Ord Mantell, Bespin, and Mon Cal were enough trouble to last me a lifetime."
"Yet, you wanted to come along on this trip," Luke said lightly, forcing his concerns to the back of his mind.
The co-pilot, however, shook her head. "No offense to your family, Master Skywalker, but I came because Tendra was willing to let me pilot the *Lady* for once and I wasn't going to pass it up. How many people can make the claim that they've piloted one of the most infamous ships in the New Republic?"
"A résumé builder then?"
The young woman at the helm nodded. "If there's one thing working for Lando has taught me, is that I should take any opportunity that

comes my way because I never know where it might lead. The fact that I get to see the Solos again is just a bonus."
"Lando," Mara Jade Skywalker dry voice caused the smuggler to wince.
"Yes, my dear?"
"You *are* teaching your employees ethics, in addition to business, right?"
"Of course," Lando said with a nervous, disarming smile. "Tendra would have my head if I did anything to the contrary."
"Right," Mara said with a shake of her head. She looked to Lando's co-pilot. "Just remember, Anja, Lando's business advice doesn't always work out."
Anja Gallandro, Lando's protégé, grimaced and nodded. "Don't I know it. I can't even count how many scrapes Lilmit and I got into following his advice. Kept life interesting though."
"I'm sure," Luke deadpanned.
"Oh, one moment. Hapan Palace Control, this is the *Lady Luck* on final approach to docking berth three."
"This is Hapan Palace Control, you are clear to dock. For security purposes, how many Jedi are aboard?"
Everyone in the cockpit raised their eyebrows.
"For security purposes, Palace Control?"
"Affirmative, anti-Jedi sentiment has increased within the past hour, safety of large parties of Jedi cannot be guaranteed."
Lando flicked the com-system over to his head-set. "Palace Control, this is the captain of the *Lady Luck*. We have three Jedi Masters onboard, the Skywalkers and their personal healer."
"Only three Jedi, Lady Luck?"
"Correct," Lando replied.
"Very well, welcome to Hapes."
The connection ended, resulting in a heavy silence as Lando's co-pilot navigated the ship around the towering spires of the Hapan palace.
Mara was the first to speak. "Anti-Jedi sentiment?"
Lando let out a small scoff. "As if the situation wasn't bad enough."
"What could have happened within the past hour, though?" Luke frowned.
"Master Skywalker," Anja touched a hand to her headset. "I've patched into the local HoloNet streams. Here, I'll put it on speaker."
"...and Bran'ke Vas, the prosecutor in the case, has expressed her confidence in a conviction. She is quoted as saying: 'The Jedi believe that they can use Hapes as they see fit. That we will simply lie down and do as they wish. The loyal followers of the late Queen Mother, Ni'Korish, will not tolerate this anymore. How can the rest of Hapes do

the same? It was Anakin Solo who massacred our beloved family members at Fondor, brought death to our very doorstep! Yet, even now, we give him medical attention and treat him as an honored guest at the palace! I intend to bring the full might of the Hapan legal code down upon Anakin Solo to show that murderers, no matter how famous they are, are simply murderers in the end. This trial will take precedence over all others, and will begin later this afternoon. People of Hapes, the refugees who have been forced to flee from their homes because the Jedi refused to surrender, I swear to you that you will all get the justice you deserve. That is all.'"

"Great, a Peace Brigade affiliate is moving out in the open, with no repercussions," Lando said with a shake of his head. "It looks like our work's going to be cut out for us, eh, Luke?"

"It's probably why my sister and Jaina are beyond angry at the moment," Luke motioned through the cockpit window at the gathered individuals by the landing platform. "The fact that the Ni'Korish can move so openly means that Ta'a Chume must have given them her implicit support."

"So instead of a family visit, this is turning into a rescue mission?"

"No," Mara shook her head at Anja's question. "We don't have enough information about the situation. It may eventually come down to that, but we can't afford to be reckless in this politically charged atmosphere. Whether Hapes remains an ally of the New Republic may depend on what happens."

"What happened to the good old days when all you had to do was take out the bad guy leader and mop up their forces?"

"That's what you get for growing up too quickly, young lady," Lando chuckled. "Heck, even going up against the Death Star seems preferable to the events nowadays."

"Please, boss. No more war stories, you're not that old yet."

"Why thank you, young lady," Lando replied, flicking a few switches as the ship touched down.

"Though you're probably older than my father would be. You got a bit of grey along the sides."

"It makes me distinguished," Lando protested.

Mara and Luke smiled and shook their head at the banter. Lando could always be relied upon for lightening the mood. Seeing Anja had been a pleasant surprise for Luke as well. He was glad that she had managed to survive the war so far, and could only hope that her presence would help his niece and not bring up any painful memories. As the landing ramp went through its decompression cycle, the Mon Calamari healer, Cilghal, joined the group.

"Thank you for coming, Cilghal," Luke said.
"We are long past favors, Master Skywalker. Though I have every bit of confidence in Tekli, if *both* Anakin and Tahiri are injured, it may be just a little too much for her."
"To hear Corran speak, the two of them will be just a little too much for anyone," Mara said wryly.
"Let's hope the Ni'Korish make the mistake of underestimating them, then," Lando added lightly. "Force knows we're going to need all the help we can get."
|* *|*
Alema strode into the guarded room containing Tahiri's bacta tank without any hesitation, winking at the nearest guardsman. It would have been a standard medical center if not for the addition of twelve heavily armed guards and two ysalamiri. The said guardsmen looked at the new arrival warily, but made no effort to stop her. It was obvious they were confident in their numbers and the ysalamiri by Tahiri's bacta tank. All twelve of them were the muscular sort, armed with both guns and blades, and Alema didn't blame them for their confidence. From their casual, yet ready stances, they would have been trouble against any opponent.
Their charge, at the moment, was floating in a drug induced slumber, unaware of the world around her. Off to the side, a disgruntled Tekli was preparing various medicines as her snout twitched in agitation. Upon seeing the Twi'lek, the Chadra-Fan healer sighed resignedly.
"Alema?"
"Tekli," Alema said airily.
"Is something wrong?"
"Oh, no," Alema shook her head, sending a flirtatious wink at another guard. "Just had some time on my hands now that Master Skywalker and the others are over with Anakin. By the way, what's with these tall, dark and silent types?"
"Jaina didn't tell you?"
"Tell me what? I've had my comm off since this morning."
"Anakin is being charged with murder, and the others can't do anything about it."
"So what does this have to do with Vong Girl?"
"She's state's evidence," the leader of the guardsmen answered, stepping forward. "Jedi, I am Lieutenant Dalian, and this one is proof that Solo's judgment is impaired. Since this Jedi was captured by the Yuuzhan Vong and shaped to their will, there is no telling whether the Vong have implanted hidden commands within her mind."

Alema blinked in an apparent attempt to digest the information. Any hesitation, however, was hidden with a flirtatious grin directed at the lieutenant. "So you're really getting this girl out of our hair. Thank the Force!"
The guards, who had been tensing in preparation for a confrontation, all looked at the Twi'lek in confusion. Some still stayed suspicious, expecting a trick, but Alema smiled both outwardly and inwardly.
Alema let out a chuckle and slinked over to the leading officer with the grace of a dancer. "You see, Lieutenant. You were right about this girl. She is a threat."
"Explain."
Alema splayed a hand across the man's chest, 'accidently' brushing her lekku against his arm as she circled him. "I've tried several times to have that little girl removed from our missions because her mind is part Vong now. But because her boyfriend's that Solo child, nothing ever came of it. Not only does she know the Vong language, she even thinks like they do, and can actually interact with their ships. For all we know, the casualties we took on our recent mission were because she was selling us out."
"I take it your views are a minority," the lieutenant said with a raised eyebrow of disbelief.
"When else could I have spoken them? As I said, her boyfriend's the 'famous Anakin Solo'," Alema said mockingly. "The guy's uncle is the Grandmaster with the flaw of giving everyone a second and third chance. I'd have to be stupid to openly criticize them."
"And yet you do so now, in front of one of your own," Lieutenant Dalian motioned to Tekli, whose mouth was opening and closing speechlessly.
"Who? Her? She's not one of my own, she's just a healer," Alema shrugged giving Tekli a look of distain. "Useless in just about every other field besides that."
Deciding to call her bluff, the lieutenant narrowed his eyes. "Will you be willing to testify your beliefs in a Hapan court?"
The sudden intake of breath from the Chadra-Fan healer behind her caused Alema to look back at her with thinly veiled disgust. Before Tekli could say anything, however, the Twi'lek chose that moment to wrap her arms around the lieutenant's waist and rest her chin on his shoulder. When the man turned his head to questioningly glance at her, Alema's face was glowing with delight. With a deep, seductive chuckle, she nodded and whispered silkily into his ear. "Absolutely. Ever since Anakin got my master killed, I've wanted to find some sort of justice. If it wasn't for him, both my master and sister would still be

alive. If it wasn't for him, I'd still have a family. I'm sure you can relate to that, lieutenant?"
"Indeed," the man's face darkened. "I lost my wife and children at Fondor. Anakin Solo should rot."
"Yes he should," Alema nodded. Disengaging herself from the officer, she placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Let me know the time and place, and I'll be sure to be there."
Tekli managed to find her voice again before Alema left the room. "Alema! What are you doing?"
"What does it look like I'm doing?" Alema replied acidly. "Anakin has constantly destroyed families with his egotistical attitude towards life. My own and those at Fondor were not the only ones he ruined. Tesar lost both his sisters on Myrkr. He even got his dad's best friend killed. It's time someone stopped him before he ruins the Jedi Order."
"I…I…I don't believe it, that you would…"
"I would. For once, I feel that what I'm doing is right." The Twi'lek glanced sharply back at the lieutenant and flashed him a soft grin. "Keep in touch, soldier boy."
Leaving a stunned audience in her wake, Alema left the room with an accomplished, predatory grin. She was fortunate, she mused, that the guards were using ysalamiri. Deception was something that was all but impossible with a Jedi, especially the more empathic ones, such as Tekli. Though the shock of her words alone might have stunned the Chadra-Fan into compliance, the ysalamiri definitely helped. As the doors slid shut behind her, Alema let her smile fall from her face and took a deep, steadying breath.
For the hundredth time since leaving his room, she questioned Anakin's sanity. His plan couldn't possibly make things any better. In fact, he might as well be giving the Hapans his head on a golden platter.
Yet, she would do as he asked. It was as simple as that. Her introspection after seeing her sister's ghost had caused Alema to realize something else about Anakin. She loved him. It was different than Tahiri's love, however. Anakin had given her a purpose on Myrkr, a fact Alema was only just now beginning to understand. She would follow him now, because he had once again given her a purpose. A meaning, a reason to continue living on. She may just be an asteroid, orbiting a blazing sun, but it was from that sun from which she drew her warmth, her direction. She knew he would somehow make it out of the mess he was in.
He was Anakin Solo, there was nothing else to it.

As the others rounded the corner on their way to visit Tahiri, Alema offered Luke a respectful bow and Jaina a perky wave, and then hurriedly left the area. She did *not* want to be anywhere near the room when Tekli relayed what had just occurred. Despite her renewed faith in Anakin, Alema doubted that even *he* would be able to get her out of that mess alive.

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"Circuitry Girl to lead, another couple Vong corvettes just arrived. Markings suggest priest caste. From the way the other ships are forming up, it looks like those were the last."

"Return to base then, we know where they're headed so there's no sense hanging around."

"Roger that, returning to base."

Garik 'Face' Loran acknowledged the response with a single click, and then turned back to the others. "Any sign that the New Republic is at least *trying* to counter this offensive?"

Wraith Squadron's communication's expert, Rani D'ne shook her head. "The new Chief of State, Pwoe, has repositioned Fleet Groups Two and Three around Kuat and Mon Calamari. Even if they were to head to Hapes now, they'd never make it in time."

"What about Fleet Group One?" Voort 'Piggy' saBinring, asked.

"They're covering the evacuation of the remaining senators and other important politicians from outlying settlements near Coruscant. So no good either," The pink-haired Zeltron replied with an apologetic tilt of her head.

Elassar Targon, the team's Devorian medic, raised a hand. "Can we not just handle this ourselves? As Elassar Targon, master of the universe, I am willing to lead us all in one last glorious fight."

"Yes!" Kell Tainer said, an excited smile coming to his face. "We can make many ships blow up!"

"Suicide missions are not allowed at this point in time," Face deadpanned, shaking his head at his squad mates.

"Will they be allowed after lunch?" Elassar said.

"Elassar."

"Yes?"

"I'm demoting you to: junior master of the universe."

"I have shamed myself. Please, end my suffering now."

"You'd think I'd be used to this after three weeks," Rani said, the corner of her mouth twitching as she fought back a smile.

"It's not so bad," Sharr Latt chuckled, then, leaning back in his chair, he looked over to Elassar. "And don't worry, the commander doesn't have the authority to demote the master of the universe."

"I can assign refresher cleaning duty," Face said dryly.
"Never mind, the commander has all the power in the galaxy."
The chime to the door rang, and the members of Wraith Squadron looked up.
"Come in," Face called out.
The doors hissed open to reveal Booster Terrik, the owner and captain of the *Errant Venture*—the only privately owned Star Destroyer in the galaxy, and current base of operations for Wraith Squadron. The large man glanced about the lounge, where the various members of the covert intelligence squad were sprawled about. "Interrupting anything?"
Face smiled and waved the man in. "Nothing important."
"Elassar's no longer the master of the universe," Kell Tainer said sadly.
Booster rolled his eyes and deadpanned. "What a loss."
"Exactly," Elassar nodded remorsefully.
"What do you need, Mr. Terrik?" Face chuckled.
"Just wanted to let you know that we've got a couple of new crew members on board, as well as the ship they came in. 'Parently they were fighting slavers out of Ryloth. Chased a slave ship and ran smack into a Vong frigate."
"So they're here for repairs?" Baljos Arnjak asked.
"Yeah, but when I told them you guys were here, their leader wanted to meet up with you."
The Wraiths all straightened, and Face frowned. He knew that Booster wouldn't just tell anyone about their presence on board his ship. "Their leader?"
"He means me, Face," a feminine voice came from the doorway.
All eyes turned in the direction, and Face was on his feet in a heartbeat looking as if he had just stuck his hand into a power coupling. Both Kell and Elassar's jaws dropped, before they recovered and smiled broadly.
"Long time no see. Kell, Elassar, are you both doing well?" A green-skinned Twi'lek greeted fondly, striding slowly through the room.
"Dia?" Face said hoarsely, a look of wonder on his face as he reached out a shaking hand.
Dia gently took it in both of hers and brought their joint hands to her chest. "It's me."
As the two embraced, the newer members of Wraith Squadron looked on in complete confusion at the raw emotions playing across the face of their commander. Booster, in the meanwhile, leaned against the door jamb, with his arms folded smugly in front of his chest.

"Her and her crew aren't the only new guests," Booster added, once Face and Dia had retreated to one of the couches. "I swear, the way you all show up, you intelligence folks are really creepy sometimes."
The Wraiths looked to Booster once more, and the burly man stepped aside. Shortly after, a much younger voice cried out in a happy greeting. "Dad!"
This time it was Kell who was stunned into silence, blinking wildly as his son darted into the room and tackled him off the side of the couch in an enthusiastic hug. "Doran! Wha-? How?"
"Mom said something about the Force guiding us here," Doran beamed, then seemed to realize there were others in the room and quickly composed himself.
"What about your Jedi training?"
"We can still train and be around you, I hope," Tyria Sarkin-Tainer replied for her son, her eyes twinkling.
Kell's head whipped up so quickly it was a surprised he didn't injure himself. After only a dazed moment, he quickly got to his feet and pulled his wife into his arms with a speed that defied his large form. With Tyria quirking an eyebrow upwards in a challenge, he bent down and proceeded to welcome her back.
"Dad!"
Booster chuckled and placed a hand on the young teen's shoulder. "Boy, when you find someone like that, I doubt you'll be complaining."
"But they don't have to do it right in front of me! Force sensitive you know!"
"I can see how that might be traumatizing for someone your age," Baljos said with mock sympathy.
When the kiss ended, the two stayed where they were, their foreheads touching. Tyria's cheeks were flushed and she made no effort to look anywhere but into the eyes of her husband.
"Welcome back," Kell breathed.
"Good to be back. Thank you."
"For what?"
"For staying alive."
"As a mere mortal, I do my best," Kell quipped, finally drawing back. Tyria likewise stepped away and smiled at her former squad-mates. "Nice to see you all again."
Dia, with one of Face's arms wrapped around her waist and one of her lekku draped across his shoulders, nodded. "And you as well."
"Wraith Squadron graduates?" Baljos guessed.

"They were part of the initial squadron," Face nodded. "Baljos, Sharr, Rani, meet Tyria Sarkin-Tainer and Dia Passik. Dia, Tyria, Baljos Arnjak, Rani D'ne, and Sharr Latt."
"This almost makes me feel like having a twenty-fifth reunion party somewhere down the line," Kell said brightly. "Just imagine, all the members of Wraith Squadron, past and present, sharing their tales of daring and adventure."
"Shhhh…" Elassar suddenly blurted, eyes wide. "Do you hear that?"
"What?"
"Our great founder and former leader, Wedge Antilles is crying."
"Glad to see that the two of you haven't changed," Dia said.
"Or grown," Face added. "So how long will the two of you be staying?"
Dia's face became apologetic. "Only as long as it takes to repair my ship. We were tracking a band of slavers selling my people to the Vong and we almost had their leader."
"And how long is that?"
Booster cleared his throat and responded before Dia could. "At least a month. Her ship is made out of some really rare parts. You just can't easily find them on any market, legal or not."
"A month?" Dia repeated. "But my ship is a standard mod…"
"Anyways," Booster continued loudly. "Don't worry about your slavers. Apparently they did something to tick off Karrde and he's going after them now."
At this, every single pair of eyes in the room turned to Booster. The Star Destroyer's owner met all their gazes unflinchingly, betraying nothing.
Face was the first to break the stunned silence. "So, I guess you'll be stuck with us old folks for a month."
"Don't worry, Doran and I will be around to keep her company," Tyria said, nodding briefly to her husband. "We'll be here until the matter on Hapes is settled."
"You know about Hapes?" Kell blinked.
"Scary Jedi powers, dear," Tyria replied, without missing a beat.
Kell fell to his knees before her. "Right, forgive me oh goddess, a mere mortal like me is prone to lapses in my memory."
"You're forgiven, for now," Tyria patted his head affectionately. "You can make it up to me later."
"Captain Terrik," Doran said quickly.
"I've told you before, it's just Booster. What do you want?"
"Do you think you can let me bunk at the opposite side of the ship? As far away from my dad's quarters as possible."
"Why?"

Doran's face twisted in a pained expression as he colored a bright red and motioned to his parents, who had yet to look away from one and other. "Scary Jedi powers."
With a Force sensitive son-in-law, and more life-experience than he would have preferred, Booster quickly understood. "The viewing port on the nose cone sound good?"
"Thank you," Doran said in relief.
"For those of us who aren't as gifted; what about Hapes?" Dia asked, steering the conversation in the room back on track.
"They're a couple days away from playing host to the largest Vong fleet since Coruscant." Face answered. "And the New Republic is in no position to stop them."
"What? Why Hapes?"
"Currently, the Solos, Skywalkers, and several of the younger Jedi are there. Last I heard, Anakin Solo and his brother and sister did something to really make the Vong angry."
"So the Vong are sending a whole fleet to capture them? Isn't that a little overkill?"
"They made them really, really, really angry," Sharr amended. "Details are sketchy at the moment, but the Solo siblings may have insulted the entire religious structure with which the Yuuzhan Vong built their society upon."
"Wow, that family never does anything on a small scale," Tyria whistled.
Face looked to her questioningly. "I thought you knew everything?"
Tyria shook her head. "I only knew that I had to get to Hapes, and that it was in danger. The finer details aren't necessarily revealed through the Force. Or at least not to someone on my level. So, what are you flyboys and girls going to do about Hapes?"
"At the moment, we haven't received any orders from New Republic Intelligence," Rani answered. "They're probably still re-organizing after losing Coruscant."
"Hapes won't be high on their priorities either," Sharr agreed. "Given his personality, Chief of State Pwoe will more than likely try to sue for peace. He won't want to risk provoking the Vong any further by sending aid to Hapes."
"What? Even if the Skywalkers and Solos are there?" Tyria frowned.
"Especially because they are there," Sharr said dryly. "What better way to say 'We surrender' than to give up the very people that disrupt the entire Vong belief system?"
"Then there's nothing we can do?" Dia said, tilting her head. "Did Wraith Squadron really change so much since I've been gone?"

Face lightly patted her shoulder and held up two fingers. "One, I didn't say that we weren't going to do anything, and two, yes, Wraith Squadron's actually changed quite a bit since you've left."
"We've gotten even crazier," Kell nodded. "In fact, Rani is the first normal person who's joined in the last decade."
"Normal?" Both Dia and Tyria looked at the pink-skinned woman.
The Zeltron smirked. "My background is much more akin to that of the first generation of Wraiths. Who knew that seducing a superior officer was frowned upon?"
"Circuitry Girl, Doc-boy, and Sharr all have sparkly clean slates." Kell added. "They have to be crazier than the rest of us to have voluntarily joined Wraith Squadron."
"Yes, we are a shame to the squadron's tradition," Baljos sighed. "But that's why Elassar is still a Wraith. We let him have all our shame and he goes and puts it in a nice little jar for later."
"Speaking of plans, this is the first time you're mentioning one, boss," Sharr said lightly. "I thought suicide missions were out?"
"They still are," Face nodded. The former child-actor lazily looked over to where Booster was still standing and offered the man a game smile. "Booster, you wouldn't mind if New Republic Intelligence temporarily commandeers this Star Destroyer, would you?"
"Like Mynok-dung!" Booster thundered.
"New Rep Intel will pay for any damages."
"Money's not going to do any good if you get my ship destroyed."
"We'll have them install a couple of the latest, military grade turbolaser and ion batteries. You know, to replace the ones you had to give up when you took over this ship?"
"They'll let me keep them afterwards?" Booster hedged.
Face nodded. "I'm sure I can arrange it."
Booster thought it over for a moment, then shook his head. "Then again, we are rushing into a fleet half the size of the one that took Coruscant. More than likely I'll lose those guns in the battle anyways."
"Think of how famous you'll be on Hapes," Sharr added. "You know, the *Errant Venture* piercing out of the stars in the heat of battle, a red blade slicing through the Vong formations and saving the day?"
Booster shook his head with a wry smirk. "Nice try kid. But Booster Terrik doesn't need to become any more famous than he already is."
Just then, one of Booster's men came running into the room. "Sir! Sir! A message from your daughter!"
"Mirax?" Booster looked at the out-of-breath man.
"Yes, sir," the man panted.
"Well? Out with it."

"Yes, sir, sorry sir. She wanted me to tell you that she and Jedi Horn are heading to Hapes in order to reinforce the Jedi already there. Apparently Hapes has put Anakin Solo on trial and are broadcasting it HoloNet."
"Solo's kid on trial…" Booster said slowly. Then the first part of the messengers' message sunk in. "What! That blasted Jedi is taking my daughter to Hapes!"
"Yes, sir," the man flinched, then held out a datapad on trembling hand. "She…she had me record the last part of her message so…so you could hear it from her."
Fuming, Booster snatched the device from the man's hand and activated it. In another moment, a small holo-image of his daughter appeared.
"Hi daddy! I hope you weren't too hard on Kovin. He's only the messenger you know. Anyways, Corran and I are headed to Hapes. Mainly to help the refugees there, but also to support Master Skywalker and the others. I know it's probably already too late and your face is as red as the sands of Kessel, but this isn't Corran's fault! We were already assisting the refugees leaving Coruscant and this opportunity just popped up. Love ya!"
The room went silent as Booster glared at the datapad. Eventually, he shoved the device back into the hands of his subordinate and stomped to the door, shaking his head. Before he left the room, he pinned the leader of Wraith Squadron with a glare, as if the entire message had been his fault. "Loran, you better have those guns ready for my ship!"
I* End of Chapter *I
A/N: So, things are gearing up for one fun show down.
To anyone who cares, I've paired Jaina with someone...it's only taken 18 chapters, but I finally made up my mind. If this pairing is absolutely essential to your enjoyment of this fic and you don't want to wait until chapter 18, PM me and I'll let you know who it is.
7/7/12 Edited for minor grammar and wording errors.

ADA 4

Four
I**I
Holocams hovered all around the packed courtroom as burly guards did their best to keep the extra reporters and refugees out of the bulging doors. The lucky few who managed to get seats all awaited the beginning of the trial with baited breath, comparing notes, researching Anakin's history, or looking up the past of one, Alema Rar.

The Twi'lek's very public defection only an hour after the trial was announced had whipped the media into a frenzy. Alema not only criticized Anakin Solo, but also accused the current make-up of the Jedi Order for allowing Anakin's actions. With tears glistening in her eyes, the blue-skinned Twi'lek recalled her past in graphic detail, the loss of her mentor, the events on New Plympto, the loss of her sister, everything.

One of the reporters opened up a holo-recording of Alema's story and her faint voice combined with the din that filled the courtroom.

"*And it's not just my family either. The Jedi Order under Master Skywalker has become inefficient and broken. There have been countless Jedi such as Numa who have lost their lives protecting refugees while Skywalker and the other masters hide in secret bases or embed themselves in Republic fleets. They are the true heroes, not the nephew of Master Skywalker. I have already listed the names of some of those who fell protecting the innocent. Fell because Master Skywalker was frozen into inaction. There are more, much more. We may all call ourselves Jedi, but because Master Skywalker cannot get his house into order, not all of us are proud to do so.*"

Jaina, hearing the recording, clenched her fist on the banister in front of her. Never did she imagine that the Jedi would be betrayed by one of their own. That Alema would even go so far as to criticize Master Skywalker was definitely unexpected. But if even other Jedi testified against Anakin, what chance did he have of any sort of fair verdict? It did not help that the room was lined with several ysalamir, preventing her from using any Jedi calming techniques. A hand was placed on her shoulder, and for a fraction of a second Jaina thought about lashing out. As quick as that thought came, it left her, and she took several deep breaths before looking for the hand's owner. It was her uncle, who was watching her with a knowing gaze. With a huff of annoyance, Jaina tore her gaze away and focused on the Hapan family crest that rested above the magistrate's chair.

The crash of a loud gong rang through the room, ushered in an excited silence.

"Bring in the accused!" A court official called out.

Brought in on a hover cart, Anakin Solo, still in his bacta tank, was guided into position. A metal shield had been erected around the tank for his privacy, allowing only his head to be seen. While the technicians checked his communication's system, heated whispers filled the room. Shortly after, the three magistrates presiding over the case, as well as a jury of six others, entered and seated themselves. Another crash of the gong, and a dead silence filled the room.

A lone magistrate rose and inclined her head towards the prosecution's table. "Though the Queen Mother will normally preside over trials of this level of importance, her recent illness has prevented her from doing so. As such, the venerable Ta'a Chume has appointed us in the Queen Mother's place. We will now begin opening statements, counselor, the floor is yours."

The prosecutor, Bran'ke Vas, moved out of her chair in a single, fluid motion. "Thank you, your grace. Anakin Solo is a murderer. It is as simple as that. I will prove to everyone that he knowingly allowed the murder of two hundred and fifty-four thousand, seventy hundred and eighty six Hapans at Fondor. That in doing so, he caused great harm to our beloved Queen Mother and forever damaged the relationship between Hapes and the New Republic. Why would he do this? How was it possible? After consulting with two Jedi who know him, they make it clear that this was a result of systematic nepotism within the Jedi Order itself. His recklessness has not only endangered and killed those closest to him, but has resulted in the galaxy-wide suffering of trillions. At the end of this trial, all of Hapes, all of the galaxy, will see Anakin Solo for who he truly is: A spoiled child who thinks that his status will allow him to get away with murder."

When the slender woman took her seat, silence filled the pro-Anakin portion of the courtroom. Even as the defense counsel began her own opening statement, hesitant glances were exchanged among the Jedi present. No one had missed the fact that Bran'ke Vas had indicated that there were two Jedi against Anakin. Alema was a given, yet who was the second?

"This isn't good," muttered Lando, gazing about the crowd and the judges.

"You're assuming that the trial was going to be a fair one in the first place," Han retorted darkly.

"It's worse than that, old buddy," Lando continued in a low whisper. "If you have Jedi speaking out against your boy, it will also reflect badly on the Jedi Order itself. Depending on what Alema and our mystery Jedi say, this could very well splinter the entire Order irreparably."

The gong sounded, marking the end of the opening statements, and the head magistrate stood once more. "As is our custom, the accused has the right to face those who will speak against him. Does the accused wish to invoke this right?"

"I do, your grace," Anakin replied. "I wish to face the two Jedi who would speak against me."

"Very well," the magistrate nodded. "Prosecutor, bring in the first Jedi."

Bran'ke Vas inclined her head and motioned to her aide. In another moment, the doors to the courtroom entered, and a somber-faced Alema respectfully entered. Heads turned to get a look, while holocams fluttered about at various angles. Alema seemed to give Anakin a hated glare as she looked in his direction, putting more purpose into her last few steps.
"Jedi Alema Rar is being used to show the accused's character and establish his past habits, your grace," Bran'ke Vas introduced.
"Step forward, Jedi Rar," the magistrate acknowledged. "The accused has chosen to confront you. He will be given a limit of twelve minutes. As a reminder, this portion is still part of the trial so anything you or he says will be on record and can be used during the main examinations."
"I understand, your grace," Alema replied.
"You may begin, Anakin Solo."
Anakin gazed evenly at Alema, his face betraying no emotion. "Why are you doing this, Alema? Are you not a Jedi like myself?"
Alema scoffed. "A Jedi like yourself? We have very different views of what makes one a Jedi, *Solo*. There are the followers of Master Skywalker, like yourself, who think you should take the war to the Vong, regardless of the consequences. Then there are others like my master and my sister who died protecting the people, victims of Vong aggression instigated by Skywalker's plans. It's a never ending cycle. The more *Jedi,* like yourself, attack the Vong, the more Jedi like Numa die because of it. It is because of Master Skywalker that good people are dying. He says he's helping, but his little assaults against Vong positions are only angering the Vong, and countless others are suffering because of it."
"So you're saying we should always be on the defensive?" Anakin pressed, sounding incredulous. "Alema, why should we wait for the Vong to attack us? Wait until they're in the skies above a planet before we do anything? Until their on the ground killing everyone? When do we intervene? As Jedi, we're sworn to protect."
"Exactly!" Alema said heatedly. "You speak as if we should abandon the planets that already have Vong fleets above them? That the people there are no longer worth the risk to save. Just *who* are we protecting? Ourselves? The political power the name 'Jedi' carries? You certainly didn't launch the Myrkr mission because you wanted to protect the civilians. Master Skywalker is afraid that the Jedi will become unimportant in the grand scheme of things, isn't he? All you're doing is going along with his views like a good little nephew. We're only several hundred strong, not nearly numerous enough to effectively fight an

offensive war. Leave that to the New Republic fleets. Isn't the Jedi way to be on the defensive, to not stir up more trouble?"
"If we fear the dark side so much that we don't do anything to stop the attacks, aren't we letting the people die by default? If the Jedi only intervene when we have to save a planet, isn't it already too late? If we can stop the Vong from building up their forces, not only can more Jedi be saved, but many civilians as well."
"The Jedi are not soldiers! We're not a special-forces unit like those in the military. The Myrkr mission proves it. We lost almost half of our strike team!" Alema snapped back. "We lost your brother! No matter what you, Master Skywalker, and whoever else thinks, the Jedi Order and its leadership simply do not have the numbers, the capabilities, or the experience in fighting a war on this scale. What we Jedi do know how to do, however, is protect those with us. We should be using our power, not to antagonize the Vong, but to protect the countless refugees this war has created."
In the gallery, Lando's eyes narrowed at the direction the conversation was heading. Though the others were currently staring at Alema as if she had grown a second head, Lando had the luxury of being less emotionally invested in the issue and could read between the lines. Alema continued to voice her stance for a purely defensive war, while Anakin advocated a more pre-emptive fight. Both picked apart each other's arguments, but at the same time underscored the loss of life created by either choice. They also made it clear that not all Jedi followed Master Skywalker for the very reasons they were mentioning. The two gradually wrapped up their arguments and Lando let out a low whistle as he shook his head.
"What is it?" Anja whispered, having watched the change in her boss's reaction.
"Later," Lando said with a brief shake of his head. "But if what's happening is what I think is happening, then Solo's kid is crazier than I thought."
"Prosecutor, bring in the second Jedi," the magistrate called out, as Alema took a seat.
Silence reigned once more as everyone turned towards the doorway, anxious to see the second Jedi turncoat. When the doors opened again, the photogenic Ganner Rhysode swaggered in. His appearance caused Jaina to leap to her feet, eyes blazing. It took a combined effort of Kyp, Zekk, Han, and Mara to keep her from vaulting over the chairs and slugging the man.

"You bastard!" Jaina yelled, struggling against her friends and family. "You already took away one brother from me and now you want to take away Anakin too!"
Ganner walked past her without comment and stood before the prosecutor without ever looking back. The formalities were quickly taken care of, and Anakin opened his confrontation of Ganner with the exact same questions.
"Ganner? I always knew you wanted to be the leader. So why are you doing this to a fellow Jedi?"
"Like Alema said, we have very different ideas of what it means to be a Jedi." Ganner said lightly, but with a hint of venom in his voice. "But where Master Skywalker and you see yourselves as taking the war to the Vong, I see cowards who hides behind fleets and secret bases. You go on enough missions to satisfy your supporters in the New Republic as well as your own conscious, but stop short of actually committing to the war. If you were a true Jedi, you wouldn't be so half-assed about it. There are groups of Jedi who have spent most of this war in the frontlines, fighting with the various resistance groups, attacking Vong supply-lines and bases. You, just like your uncle, only act if something threatens a fellow Jedi then slink off back to the homebase. It was true on Yavin Four, just like it was true on Myrkr."
Anakin raised an eyebrow. "Blindly rushing into the Yuuzhan Vong without a clear plan of attack is pointless. At best you blow up a few ships, at worse, you get your companions killed and endanger others. The Vong are not stupid. If you keep attacking them, eventually they'll learn from you, learn your tricks and the way you think. This will not only make them stronger against you, but against any others they'll face in the future. We have to use what we have with surgical precision, attacking not the body, but the heart and mind of the Vong. Your idea of taking the war to the Vong will scar their body and leave a few pinpricks, but in a war of attrition, you'll lose. Especially if you have to protect non-Jedi in the process. If the Vong expect constant attacks, they will be that much hard to defeat."
Ganner pounded the desk in front of him theatrically. "And darting in and out is any better? You can kill a leader, destroy their secret weapon, but they'll still come. As Jedi, we are defenders of the galaxy. We're supposed to be saving people on a continuous basis, not acting only when we feel like it. Groups like Kyp's Dozen have lost many members over time trying to stem back the advancement of the Vong. Does your Master Skywalker acknowledge them? No. He instead criticizes them for being too reckless, aggressive. But if it weren't for the Dozen harassing the Vong's ship-ports and supply lines, many

others would have died. This is a war against a warrior race. The only thing the Vong will respect is brute force. The only thing they will respond to is constant aggression. A part of the reason why they are so infuriated with Master Skywalker's Jedi is because they continue to deny the warriors the fight they want. A frustrated Vong is a Vong that then takes his anger out on the population. If we become an opponent the Vong can truly respect, we can not only save lives, but help end the war a whole lot sooner. Your actions are just like that of your uncle. At best he's ineffective, at worse, he's prolonging this war."
While the audience murmured at Ganner's outburst, Lando reclined in his chair, shaking his head. To those watching, it may have looked like an action of disgust or disbelief, but in actuality Lando was thoroughly impressed. He still wasn't sure what the bigger picture was, but he now had an idea.
Ganner and Anakin, in the meantime, wrapped up their own arguments, and the magistrate announced a recess until the following morning.
As the crowd began to stream from the courtroom, Jaina started to move towards Alema and Ganner. Prosecutor Bran'ke Vas, however, placed herself between them.
"Ms. Solo, I am sorry, but I will not allow you to intimidate my witnesses. They are helping Hapes of their own free will and it will be a crime if you attempt to corrupt their testimony."
"Hapan Law is what got my brother into this mess in the first place," Jaina said darkly, sending a heated glare towards the other two. "It's a shame Hapan Law won't protect them once we leave this planet."
She whirled away and stormed off.
With the others out of the courtroom, Ganner exhaled slowly. "This is just the beginning."
"Uh huh," Alema said. "Any regrets?"
"Hey, I have a chance to have my handsome mug splashed across every major HoloNet feed out there. Why would I regret it? You?"
"No, this is kind of fun, isn't it?"
"Aside from the whole being ostracized from everyone bit, yeah."
"We're crazy aren't we?"
Ganner smirked at the Twi'lek Jedi and patted her arm. "Crazy is a good thing. I'm only worried about happens next."
|* *|
Tenel Ka believed in the Force. That was a fact. It was hard not to when one was a Jedi. She also believed that everything occurred for a reason, be it good or bad. It was why she now puzzled over Anakin's request to see her at such a late hour. The trial came to the forefront

of her thoughts. The Hapan princess wondered what Ta'a Chume had done to get both Ganner and Alema to betray Anakin. There could be no other explanation as to their actions. Why they would openly denounce Master Skywalker and attack Anakin at such a place and time was beyond Tenel Ka. Neither may have been as close to Anakin as some of the others, but Tenel Ka could never have believed that they would betray him.
Tenel Ka mildly took note of the armed guards outside Anakin and Tahiri's secure medical facility as she passed by them. Then as her senses caught up to her, she stopped in her tracks. Resuming her walk, though at a much slower pace, she subtly evaluated the nearest guards. The red flight-suits and slightly modified crest of the Hapan Royal Family were a clear indicator as to the loyalties of these guards. Her grey eyes hardened and her jaw clenched. That Ta'a Chume would dare use the Ni'Korish faction to guard her friends was the last straw. Taking great care not to let her anger show, Tenel Ka stiffly walked by the last of the guard and into the medical bay.
She exhaled sharply as her access to the Force was shut off. It was hard not to notice the several ysalamir-holding cages lining the room. The only illumination came from the two bacta tanks at the far end of the room; both Anakin and Tahiri had been moved together earlier that day so security could be concentrated on one instead of two places. Tahiri appeared to be unconscious, but Anakin was wide awake and waiting.
"You got my message," Anakin said lightly.
"I did, my friend."
Anakin smiled weakly. "Good."
"Is there a reason you wished to speak to me at this late an hour? Should you not be resting?"
"Yes to both questions. I actually have a very big favor to ask of you."
"A favor?"
"Yes," Anakin nodded once. "It's a big one. When the Vong enter the Hapes cluster, announce that you are assuming your mother's throne."
Tenel Ka pinned Anakin with an inquisitive stare. "'When the Vong arrive?' Why not tomorrow? Why at all?"
Anakin swallowed visibly. "It's because, when the trial is over, I want you to personally hand me over to the Vong."
Tenel Ka was silent for a moment, then cocked her head in concern. "My friend, are you sure you have recovered sufficiently? What you ask…"
"Is a lot, I know."

"If I were to take the throne tomorrow, I could put an end to the trial or exonerate you."
"You could do that, yeah," Anakin said. "And you would screw up a very delicate plan, not to mention the biggest gamble I'll probably make in a while. It's why I wanted to talk to you before tomorrow's, errr, today's trial."
"Then again, I would have to ask why you wish me to do as you have asked."
"It's for the good of Hapes?"
"You dying at the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong is *not* for the good of Hapes or your friends and family."
"The Vong won't kill me right away," Anakin said softly. "Knowing them, they'll first try to turn me to their way of thinking. If that fails, they'll take me to their leader so he can have the honor of killing a Solo."
"That does not make your case any stronger. Why have me take the throne, only to have me turn you over to the Vong? The truth, my friend."
Anakin went silent, his eyes darting to the side as he was weighed the consequences. Finally, he met Tenel Ka's piercing gaze with steady blue. "You have to keep this a secret and you have to promise me you won't do anything after I tell you."
"I will not betray you."
"Jacen's on Coruscant."
The young Jedi woman felt as if a bucket of ice water had been thrown on her as she rocked back on her heels. "Jacen is on…"
"Coruscant, yeah," Anakin said. "And so is the Vong Supreme Overlord. When the Yuuzhan Vong fleet arrives, you will turn me over to them, buying your people some time. Their fleet commander will then take me to Coruscant. To Jacen. So, will you do it? If I promise to rescue my brother, will you become the Queen Mother of Hapes?"
The Dathomiri Jedi woman held a hand up to her chest as her heart raced, her mind lost in thought at the possibility of reuniting with Jacen. Taking several deep breaths, Tenel Ka glanced back up at the younger Solo. "I am strongly inclined to agree, but how will you get him out? You are only one person."
"Can I just have you trust me on this?"
"Does Jaina or Tahiri know that you are doing this?"
Anakin cast a sidelong glance at the nearby bacta tank. "Do you think they would let me do this if they knew?"
Tenel Ka looked a way for a moment. On one hand, she wanted Jacen safe and sound, more than anything. Yet, on the other, she could not

ask Anakin to do this, to risk his life and the heartbreak of his family. Then again, Jacen was Anakin's brother. Would she deny Anakin the chance to save his family member, even if the risk was great? Could she place all her hopes, her future, into the hands of the younger Jedi?
She tested the waters. "You can get him back?"
"That's the general idea."
The Hapan princess shook her head, silently cursing herself as she gave in. "Promise me. If you promise to bring him back safely, I will agree to your plan."
Anakin's expression softened at the pain in the older teen's voice. It was the same pain he had heard in Tahiri's voice back on Myrkr. Offering Tenel Ka a reassuring smile, he nodded. "I promise."
"Then in two days' time, I shall be Queen Mother."
"And in a couple days after that, I'll hopefully have Jacen back here safe and sound."
Swallowing painfully, Tenel Ka turned away lest Anakin see the tears gathering in her eyes. Without another word, the future Hapan queen left the room, the doors sliding shut behind her.
In relief, Anakin closed his eyes and steadied his breathing. Had he not already been submerged in bacta, he would have sought out the nearest chair to collapse in. It was a bit unnerving having to coordinate everything from a bacta tank and hear any news secondhand. The ysalamir weren't helping either. With the Force, Anakin could have sped up his healing and touched base with the others. Without it, things were that much harder. He counted himself lucky that, so far, things had gone as well as they had. To say that he was nervous was an understatement. So many things could go wrong, so many people could lose their lives if his plan didn't work out. The last thing he needed was any surprises.
"When were you planning on telling me about this little rescue mission of yours, Anakin Solo?"
Anakin flailed a bit in the bacta at the sound of Tahiri's voice. He whirled around and saw her awake and staring at him, looking none too pleased. "How much did you hear?"
"Enough to make me really want to kick you."
"Um….I can explain?"
"You better."
|* *|
Tenel Ka stared out at the rising sun while gripping the necklace that held the emerald ring her mother had given her. It was hard to even fathom that this would only be the third day since she had returned to Hapes. She had survived a hellish mission, slew countless Vong, only to

find herself in danger of losing in the cut-throat game of Hapan politics. She despised the game something fierce, but could not avoid it. She was a princess of the Hapan Royal Family, there was no denying it. Even if Anakin hadn't told her to take the throne, she might have done so anyways. If only to end the constant bickering and backstabbing that had taken its toll on her mother. She felt no obligation to the people of Hapes, would have preferred to be a Jedi. But, as she had learned long ago, wishes and dreams rarely came true. Reality was much, much harsher.

"It's been three years, maybe four, and you haven't changed one bit."

"Anja," Tenel Ka acknowledged, without turning around. When they were younger, Tenel Ka had to admit that she had felt a small amount of jealousy towards Anja's friendship with Jacen. But that had been another time, another place. Things had changed for them all. It was nice to see that another of their old friends was still alive, but Tenel Ka was too tired at the moment to truly take comfort in that thought.

"Whatcha doing up here on the roof so early?" The brunette pulled herself up from the ledge and seated herself on the sloped panels of the palace rooftop.

"Thinking," Tenel Ka said absently, running the ring between her fingers.

"About Jacen?" Anja asked gently.

Tenel Ka glanced briefly at the seated woman next to her. "Among other things. Why are *you* on the roof this early in the morning?"

Anja made a face. "A side-effect of being on andris spice for so long. Your healer cured me of my addiction, but I guess the physical damage was already done. I'll be lucky if I can get more than an hour or two of sleep at a time. Anyways, I saw you climb up here earlier and was watching you…think. Need a friend?"

Tenel Ka released the ring she had been holding, her arm falling to her side. "The sentiment is appreciated, Anja."

"But?"

"But a lot has changed since we last met."

"That's true," Anja sighed. She unconsciously reached up to the side of her head as she flicked her hair back. As she did, Tenel Ka briefly saw the flash of something metallic.

"Anja?"

"Yes?" Anja then realized where her hand was and hastily tried to pull her long hair back into place. "It's an implant that helps me deal with some of the other side effects I mentioned. Lando was nice enough to pay for it."

"There are other side effects?"

Anja chuckled and looked away. "Yeah, the spice may have allowed me to fight like a Jedi, but it really screwed up my nervous system in the long run. I've developed some sort of neural decay, where my nerves are just firing themselves to death. The implant helps keep it regulated, but occasionally I have the odd twitch or spasm. Docs don't think I'll live past thirty."
"I am sorry."
"Don't be, it's my mistake," Anja said bravely. "How about you? How have the last couple of years been for you and all the others?"
Tenel Ka gazed across the capital city as memories flashed through her mind. "It has been….tough. The war has taken its toll on us all."
"I'm sure. If it wasn't for Lando and Tendra helping me through, well, everything, I probably would have gone insane by now. At least you all have each other."
"At least there is that," Tenel Ka murmured.
A small silence stretched between the two, with Anja casting hesitant glances at the red-haired warrior. Finally, she swallowed and asked her question. "Can you feel him? Jacen I mean."
"I cannot."
"But…but he's alive right? The Vong haven't killed him?"
"They have not."
"Then there's still a chance to save him. Why aren't you, Jaina, and the others rocketing off this planet to look for him?"
Tenel Ka narrowed her eyes at the older woman. "Were that were possible, we would not be having the conversation."
Anja flinched. "Right, sorry. It's just, seeing you, Zekk, Lowie, and Jaina again…it didn't feel right without one of Jacen's bad jokes."
"Jacen has not told any jokes for a while," Tenel Ka said.
"What?" Anja blinked.
"The war has changed him. He is different from the Jacen in your memory, yet he is still he."
"Different? How?"
"It is difficult to put into words. He is…more serious, more concerned with the safety of his family. He was willing to give himself to the Vong so that his brother and sister might escape. The carefree boy you so fondly recall is no longer. He will no doubt change again after his time as a prisoner of the Vong." Tenel Ka's lone hand curled into a tight fist at the thought. She could not lose him, not after everything they had been through.
"If Jacen is anything at all like the young boy I remember, he'll make it through this, Tenel Ka."
"But at what cost?" Tenel Ka whispered softly. "At what cost?"

I* *I
"So it is true then, you are the one who armed Centerpoint Station?"
"I was."
"Were you ordered to arm the weapon?"
"No, I wanted to…"
"So not only did you arm the weapon, you used your own judgment to do so? Am I incorrect?"
"No."
"And because you armed the weapon, it killed nearly a quarter of a million loyal Hapan soldiers, is that also true?"
"Objection! Your grace, the prosecution is jumping to conclusions."
"I'll withdraw the question. Anakin Solo, what were you planning to do once you armed the weapon?"
"I was going to fire on the Vong fleet."
"And did you?"
"No."
"Did you deactivate the station then?"
"No, I never got a chance…"
"Tell the court, Anakin Solo, can anyone else activate the station?"
"I don't believe so. It is attuned to my biometric signature."
"So, you activated one of the most powerful weapons in the galaxy, but didn't fire it. How then, did a quarter of a million Hapan soldiers die?"
"My cousin decided to fire the weapon in my place."
"Would he have been able to fire the weapon if you *hadn't* activated the station?"
"No, he wouldn't have."
"Would *you* have had the same results had *you* fired the weapon?"
"No, I…"
"I think the court has heard enough. The deaths of a quarter of a million people are directly due to your negligence and poor judgment. Is this not a fact?"
Silence filled the courtroom.
"Is this not a fact?" Bran'Ke Vas repeated in a softer voice that held much malice.
"It is true," Anakin replied evenly.
"Your grace, the prosecution has no further questions for this man."
"Very well, the court will be in recess for lunch. The trial will resume in two hours."
With a bang of a gavel, the silence that had filled the courtroom was broken with animated conversation. Everyone stood and the doors to the room opened. A team of six guards used a repulsor-sled to move Anakin's bacta tank out of the courtroom, and the media was once

more swarming over whomever they could get their hands on. Almost on cue, both Alema and Ganner stood at once and motioned to the horde of reporters, their rather loud statements denouncing Luke Skywalker's Jedi Order, instantly drawing a crowd.
In the meantime, Ta'a Chume had pulled granddaughter aside into a nearby room. "If you have not already, you can now clearly see that this trial will have only one result, Tenel Ka."
"That is a fact," Tenel Ka agreed with a small quirk of her head.
"You still will not take the throne?"
"As I have told you previously, Ta'a Chume, I will not allow you to dictate my future."
The lines around the matriarch's eyes tightened. "Come now, granddaughter. Our scout vessels have already reported that advance elements of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet have entered the Hapes Cluster. Our people need a strong leader and you gain nothing by maintaining this stubbornness that you unfortunately have inherited from your mother."
"Ta'a Chume, even you should realize by now that even if I do become the Queen Mother, there is nothing I can do to protect Anakin Solo from his fate. The defection of both Alema Rar and Ganner Rhysode and their words against him have made it impossible." As Tenel Ka spoke, she took private satisfaction in darkening of Ta'a Chume's face. The Hapan matriarch definitely did not like losing control of any situation, especially one that had been of her own making.
"Their participation was not accounted for," Ta'a Chume said dismissively, one of her hands clenched. "But it does not matter. This is the future of Hapes we are taking about, and it is far more important than the life of one foolish Jedi child."
Tenel Ka was silent for a moment, the din from the adjacent courtroom filtering through the closed doors. Finally, she met Ta'a Chume's eyes.
"I will give you my final answer at the end of the trial."
"At the end of the…"
"Now that it is clear that I will not be able to save Anakin Solo, it no longer matters if I take the throne before his trial is over," Tenel Ka said smoothly. "I will inform you of my decision before the verdict is read."
"I supposed that is for the best then," Ta'a Chume agreed, knowing when to back down. "Then I will hear your answer tomorrow."
"Tomorrow then," Tenel Ka inclined her head. "Now, if you will excuse me, grandmother. I am one of the defense's witnesses to Anakin Solo's character and need to meet with them before the trial resumes."

"Of course, you may go," Ta'a Chume said haughtily, as if Tenel Ka's request to leave was a great victory.
Little did the Hapan matriarch know, that would be the last victory she would ever have.
|* *|*
As the trial had gone the previous day, it had once again adjourned before the scheduled dinner hour of the Hapan palace. Where the first part of it had been used to establish and proved Anakin Solo's crimes, the second had been devoted solely to questioning his judgment and character. Tahiri had been brought out as an example, and been questioned thoroughly about her ordeal on Yavin IV, much to the chagrin of the others. As she recalled her capture, however, her voice began to take a harsher tone.
To the surprise of everyone, Tahiri began to criticize Anakin's decisions, claiming that he had abandoned her to save his own skin and that he had only come back to fulfill the hero-complex he had. She also accused Luke of abandoning the Jedi Temple, making sure that the public knew that irregular forces, not other Jedi, were responsible for the rescue of the temple's occupants . There had been so much hatred in her voice and her eyes had hardened to such an extent that those who knew her were forced to look at her in a different light. An uncomfortable silence filled the courtroom after she had been wheeled out, with the presiding magistrates taking a few moments to compose themselves.
Once again, when it came time for Alema and Ganner, the two did everything in their power to not only discredit Anakin, but the entire Jedi Order as well. Again, Jaina had to be held back by her mother and friends when Alema, after testifying, smirked in her direction. Now, as the group walked through the secure halls of the palace, their displeasure could be heard loud and clear.
"That bitch is enjoying this!" Jaina hissed.
"No more than Ganner is," Zekk muttered, having watched the other defector preen in front of the news cameras.
"There is nothing we can do about it now," Luke Skywalker said.
"I know," Jaina said mutinously. "But there is only so much I can take."
Luke nodded knowingly and placed a hand on his niece's shoulder. "I understand that you flew here on a Yuuzhan Vong vessel. I know I speak not only for myself when I say that I am fairly interested in it."
Jaina blinked at the change in topic. "What has that got to do with…oh Sithspit, I forgot about the Vong."
"The Vong?" Mara said.

"Yeah," Jaina quickly checked the halls. "We had a couple of Vong Shamed Ones who joined us in our escape. Tahiri told them to stay on the ship when we landed."
"Then we should probably convince the Hapan authorities to temporarily release Tahiri from custody," Leia said.
"That'd work great, mother," Jaina rolled her eyes. "What are we going to say? 'Excuse me, can we have her free for a bit, we need her to talk to a couple of Vong we smuggled onto your planet.' 'Side's she's still in that bacta tank."
"Didn't Tekli mention that Tahiri would be able to leave that tank today?" Zekk spoke up.
Cilghal confirmed his question. "Yes, though she will still be weak, her life is no longer in any danger."
"There," Leia said. "We can say that we're taking her out for some exercise for her health. We'll only be gone for an hour or two anyways."
"And maybe we can find out why she said what she said in the trial," Anja added. "I though she and Anakin were close."
"They normally are," Zekk said. "And that's a good idea. I also want to find out what is happening. Ganner and Alema were unexpected, but not necessarily shocking. But Tahiri…"
"It almost sounded like someone else was speaking during the second part of her questioning, didn't it?" Jaina agreed. "The Tahiri I know would never have said those things."
"Then it's decided," Lando clapped his hands together. "To the medical bay we go."
The walk was a short one, as everyone was anxious to get to the bottom of things and moved at a relatively quick pace. While the rest of the palace began their nightly meals, the Jedi and their friends moved through the empty palace hallways. As they neared the room, their Force senses once more dimmed.
"I don't think I'll ever get used to that," Zekk muttered, shivering slightly as he then loss access to the Force altogether.
"At leassst itz only temporaryz," Tesar chuckled, his own tail flicking in agitation as the group bypassed the hallway full of heavily armed guards.
The door to the medical bay slid open, and the first thing everyone heard were raised voices.
"Sithspawn, Anakin! I knew you were reckless, but what you're planning is suicide!"

"It's not suicide if it works right," Tahiri's heated response could be heard. The lack of any metallic tint in her voice indicated her bacta-free status.
"He's not invincible, Tahiri. Haven't either of you learned anything from Myrkr?"
"That's why we're asking for your help, Master Horn," Anakin's metallic voice replied. "You were with Intelligence once, is there anything I've over looked?"
"We're going through with this plan with or without your input," Tahiri added. "So you can either help and make this less suicidal, or leave us be."
"And what's stopping me from telling your parents, Anakin?"
"You would rather I let him die?"
"He wouldn't want you to save him at the expense of your own life. It's why he surrendered in the first place."
"This is a war, we all have to risk our lives to get things done."
"You're only seventeen! Tahiri's fifteen! Risk your lives after you've actually had a chance to live! Mirax, say something!"
"Of course we'll help you sweetie," Mirax said brightly.
"Mirax!"
"Corran, they're already committed to this. Like Tahiri said, we can either help them and increase their chances of survival. Or pretend they'll listen to our warnings and they'll go off anyways, but without our aid."
Corran turned away from the tanks, rubbing at his face tiredly. "Fine. But if you two—oh, Master Skywalker!"
"Corran," Luke acknowledged.
"Interesting conversation," Mara added.
"It was, wasn't it?" Mirax said in greeting.
"Fine, be all secretive," Mara rolled her eyes. "I'm sure it's all my nephew's fault anyways. When did the two of you get in?"
"Just an hour ago," Mirax answered. "But we were following the trial on the news. Your nephew's clever, I'll give him that."
"Too clever for his own good," Corran grumbled. While he, Mara, Lando, and several of the others went off to converse in low tones, Anakin's immediate family approached both him and Tahiri.
"It's good to see you out of the bacta, Tahiri," Leia smiled at the young blond teen.
"Feels good to be out of it," Tahiri said. "They had me drugged up like a *roshtak* during his *yu'ztaktar*."
"I'll take your word for it," Leia replied, ignoring Tahiri's vongspeak.

"His rite of passage," Tahiri clarified. "One of the warrior's tasks was to resist a variety of toxins and drugs. Only the strongest survived and could bond with an amphistaff."
"Tahiri," Jaina said worriedly.
Tahiri blinked, then shook her head. "Sorry. Ever since I was drugged, the memories have become a whole lot clearer. I'm fine though."
"If you say so," Jaina said.
"Really, Jaina, I'm fine," Tahiri motioned towards Anakin. "You really think that brother of yours would let me talk this long if I wasn't?"
"Anakin?" Jaina looked to the floating figure.
"She's still Tahiri. Not sure if that's still a good thing," Anakin confirmed, causing Tahiri to stick her tongue out at him.
Jaina and Leia both shared an amused glance, shaking their heads. Anakin, in the bacta tank, shifted a little as he flushed in embarrassment. He was only fortunate that there were still yslamir in the room otherwise all the other Force sensitives would have picked up on it.
Still chuckling to herself, Leia motioned to the door of the room. "We're thinking about getting you some exercise since you've been in the tank for so long. Are you feeling up to it?"
"Sure," Tahiri shrugged. "The lieutenant in charge of the guards outside said I was free to go anyways."
"He did?"
"Yup," Tahiri said, her expression souring. "Alema's got him wrapped around her pinky finger. If she told him the sky was pink, he'd believe her."
"Alema?"
"Yeah, her." Tahiri said with absolutely no enthusiasm. Apparently even their mission to Myrkr hadn't settled anything between the two.
"Well if you're free then, let's go," Jaina said, seemingly happier now that she knew that Tahiri held a low opinion of the Twi'lek.
"Where?"
"To the Vong ship."
"Yuuzhan Vong," Tahiri automatically corrected. Then, she too seemed to remember their passengers from another galaxy. "Oh!"
"I know, hopefully they're still alright."
"Come on, let's go."
The trip to the landing pad was a lot slower. Though Tahiri was out of the bacta, it was clear that she had yet to fully recover and the group had to stop several times. Fortunately, now outside of the ysalamir, they others were able to use the Force to help sustain her. Eventually

they all reached the secure landing pad and saw that one of the palace's turbolaser batteries was aimed directly at the *Trickster*.
"At least they're taking precautions," Jaina commented.
"It's a Vong ship," Anja said. "I'd have at least two batteries targeting it, even if I thought it was empty. Those things are living creatures after all, right?"
"They can think and act on their own, but they won't hurt anything unless you hurt it first or command it to hurt someone," Tahiri snapped.
Anja took a step back. "Sorry, I didn't mean anything by it."
"You're just like all the rest, you don't even try to understand them," Tahiri remarked bitingly. She then promptly strode away from the group and stroked the control cluster that activated the ramp. Without another glance back, she entered the ship and disappeared from sight.
Bewildered, Anja looked to the others. "Was she always like that?"
"Ever since she was a Vong prisoner, she's been a bit touchy about them," Zekk said hesitantly. "But we know that she's completely devoted to Anakin so we try not to let it affect us."
Though everyone started to approach the re-appropriated Yuuzhan Vong vessel, Tahiri came running down the ramp in a hurry.
Jaina quickly moved to support the younger teen as the brief sprint had winded her. "Tahiri?"
"We're in big trouble," Tahiri said hurriedly. "Advance elements of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet have already entered the system. The full fleet is projected to arrive in a couple of days!"
I* *I
"Your Eminence."
High Priest Naazar made no motion to acknowledge his subordinate.
"Your Eminence, representatives from one of the infidel factions on Hapes requests an audience with you. They are similar in kind to the Peace Brigade movement."
Naazar's lips curled in distaste. "More vermin who would sell out their own?"
"Sir, they are offering to surrender to you the *Jeedai* Skywalkers and the Solo children, as well as any other *Jeedai* on their planet of Hapes."
"Is that so?"
"Yes your Eminence, I would not waste your time otherwise."
"Very well, bring them here."
The warrior bowed lowly and then hastily left the bridge. He returned moments later with several men in red clothes, all looking extremely nervous to be on an organic vessel. "These are the ones who requested to speak with you."

Naazar stepped up to and evaluated each of them, shaking his head at the naked fear in their eyes. "My subordinate tells me you have an offer to make?"
"Yes, your Eminence," one of the infidel men said, bowing stiffly.
"Then speak."
"Yes, your Eminence. My name is Trisdin of the house…"
"I do not care who you are, speak your offer or I shall end your life here."
"We have come here seeking your support, and in turn, we shall raise your status in the eyes of your people by handing you your hated enemies."
"I am listening."
"Our current leader is ill and Hapes is in the process of choosing a successor. When you invade with your fleet, if you will help us install a leader that is more sympathetic to our joint causes, we will surrender the Jedi and whatever resources you need to further your cause. The faction I am in has no desire to go to war with you. We know that you are superior. If you will have mercy, I guarantee that we can work out a deal that will be beneficial to the both of us."
Naazar stared at the man named Trisdin. The man had once been a fighter, but in recent days it appeared that he had forsaken his warrior ways in favor of the dining table. There was shrewd intelligence in Trisdin's eyes, and it was obvious that he was the type to change masters whenever it suited him.
"If I were to help your faction, you would surrender all of this system, and the Jedi in it, to me?"
"Yes, your Eminence."
"And who is this leader you speak of and why does he not personally ask for my help?"
Trisdin lowered his head. "No disrespect is meant, it is just that Lady Alyssia cannot move freely in these times. We cannot tip our hand."
"So she sends the five of you instead," Naazar glanced at the party, walking up and down their line once more.
"Yes, your Eminence," Trisdin nodded.
"I have just one question," Naazar said calmly, stopping in front of the nobleman.
"Yes, your Eminence?"
"Do you know, infidel, what it is I dislike the most?"
Trisdin looked up nervously at the sudden, harsh tone of the question. "N…no."
The nobleman twitched, gasping a dry heave as Naazar suddenly punched a hole through his chest. "I dislike the filth who clutter the

table of the powerful, hoping for scraps, yet biting their master if they do not receive any."
The remaining four men took several steps back in panic, only to be rebuffed by a line of amphistaff wielding warriors. Naazar withdrew his hand, holding Trisdin's heart as the nobleman collapsed lifelessly to the ground. Crushing the organ and discarding it, Naazar looked to the others. "Do not be afraid, I will accept the deal this piece of filth proposed and help your leader reach the throne. In exchange, you will turn over all *Jeedai* to me."
The four men breathed sighs of relief and emitted small, nervous bouts of laughter. One of them came up and bowed.
"Thank you, your Eminence, I assure you, you will not regret this."
"I have just one question," Naazar said calmly.
"Y…yes?"
"Of the four of you left, which of you would you say is best suited in delivering this news to your leader?"
"W…why do you ask, sir?"
Naazar's expression hardened. "You are all like the one on the ground, worse as you deemed him fit to lead you. Only one is needed to deliver a message, the others will join him in death."
Panicked screams and cries filled the bridge, followed by an abrupt silence.
❙* *❙*
"*Terror has spread throughout Hapes as news of the arrival of advance elements of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet is made public. The space above Hapes is now clogged with vessels as refugees and Hapans alike begin a mass exodus to escape the coming onslaught. The Queen Mother has yet to make a statement, leaving many to wonder about the future of the Royal Family and whether this is the end. With the Royal Hapan Navy still shattered after the disaster at Fondor, there is little our military can do against the invaders from another galaxy. Much of the blame has been placed on arrival of the Jedi Grandmaster, Luke Skywalker, and his family. It is widely believed that the Yuuzhan Vong will leave Hapes alone if the Jedi surrender to them. But, only time can tell what will happen.*
In other news, during the break of the trial of accused murderer Anakin Solo, our reporters caught up with the star prosecution's character witness Ganner Rhysode. When asked why he had decided to testify against his former leader, he had this to say: 'I made my point clear yesterday. Master Skywalker's Jedi Order is fragmented almost beyond repair. Right now, it's built on a narrow view of the Force and too integrated within both the New Republic's military and political

systems. If this goes on, the ideological schisms and political infighting that form the core of his Order will eventually lead to the destruction of everything Jedi are supposed to hold dear. This entire trial occurred because Master Skywalker is out of touch with both the feelings and the thoughts of his supposed pupils. Students are supposed to learn from the master, and the reverse is also true. Yet, Master Skywalker chooses to brush aside the many different views that make up his order and forge ahead with his own brand of Jedi-beliefs. Anakin Solo is just as headstrong, willing to sacrifice others to further this broken system. I'm testifying against Anakin to make sure that a broken system doesn't become any more broken than it already is. Now, that's all I have to say, thank you for your time.'"

The main lounge of the *Lady Luck* was full to capacity, being one of the few places one could go without any listening devices, hovering cameras, or curious onlookers. Most of the people in the lounge wore a mixture of sheer fatigue and bitterness on their faces as they attempted to unwind from the impossibly long day. The news report did nothing to better their moods. The fact that an armed escort had arrived earlier to escort Tahiri back to the medical bay only made them more embittered. Yet, there were two individuals who stared at the HoloNet report in deep thought. One looked to the other and saw his pensive expression reflected back at him.

"You noticed it too?" Lando said cautiously.

Mara nodded. "If this means what I think it means, I am going to remind that brat the consequences of scaring his elders."

"Good, then it isn't me," Lando said, a sly smile flickering across his tired face. "You have to admit, he's taking a pretty big gamble."

"And if it means what I think it means, a certain princess must be in the loop too. Her defense of his character wasn't exactly a shining one," Mara's hawk-like gaze swooped over towards Tenel Ka, who had been standing by one of the viewports holding the emerald ring her mother had given her.

"She might be able to explain the one part of this that still has me confused," Lando nodded.

"How he's going to get out of this?"

"Yeah," Lando rubbed at his face.

A quick check of the cabin revealed that the others were either in conversations or lost in thoughts of their own. As both Mara and Lando approached Tenel Ka, however, they could see a troubled frown on her face. The Dathomiri Jedi was examining her ring closely under the porthole's faint light.

"Is there a problem, Tenel Ka?" Mara asked.

Tenel Ka looked up. "Mr. Calrissian, may I have access to your ship's computers?"
Lando's eyebrows rose. "Of course, but can I ask why?"
"My mother may have left me a secret message on this ring," Tenel Ka held up the artifact and it glinted ever so slightly.
"A secret message," Lando whistled quietly. "Now this is definitely the stuff of court intrigue. Go ahead and use the back holoprojectors, they're secure."
"Thank you."
While Tenel Ka undid the clasp of her necklace and slid the ring off the golden chain, both Lando and Mara exchanged glances once more. It was apparent that their questioning would have to wait. In the meantime, Tenel Ka had placed the ring onto the holo-pad and activated the device. Within seconds, the emerald on the ring glowed brightly, and a three dimensional image was projected above. Reading the small inscription, Tenel Ka took a step backwards in alarm. The others, sensing a rare moment of surprise escape from the normally stoic woman, turned around in shock.
"Tenel Ka, what is it?" Jaina asked.
Tenel Ka worked her jaw several times as she tried to formulate the answer. "It…it is the location of a rebuilt Hapan Fleet."
Everyone in the cabin froze.
"A rebuilt Hapan Fleet?" Luke repeated.
"Yes," Tenel Ka examined the small bar of scrolling text. "Fourteen Battle Dragons, twenty-six battle cruisers or similarly sized vessels, several dreadnaughts, a wing of gunboats, and four wings of fighters. All are fully crewed and awaiting orders."
"That will not be a large enough force to repel the incoming Yuuzhan Vong," Jagged Fel said slowly. "If the reports from the media are even half true, they will still be outnumbered at least three to one."
"It's better than nothing," Jaina shrugged.
"In light of the recent events, I do not think the Hapans would be too happy if their new fleet was destroyed so soon after its discovery," Jag replied. "Hapes, and the Jedi, cannot afford another 'Fondor.'"
"Jag," Jaina glared.
"The point is moot until someone takes the throne," Mara said firmly, nipping any argument before it could start.
All eyes went back to Tenel Ka, who inclined her head briefly. "I had intended to see Ta'a Chume after the trial, but I will now see her first thing in the morning."
"What?" Zekk frowned in confusion. "You intended to be Queen Mother all along?"

"No, I was initially going to refuse the offer and let one of the other members of the Royal Family take the throne."
"And what about Anakin and Tahiri?" Jaina said frostily.
Tenel Ka met Jaina's darkened gaze unflinchingly. "I was going to recruit you and the others and get them out our usual way."
At this, Corran Horn winced. "I'm almost afraid to ask."
Zekk answered with a faint smirk. "It involves explosions, jailbreaks, and many angry people chasing us."
"I'm glad you changed your mind," Corran said dryly. "Hapes won't be able to survive both your group of friends *and* Anakin and Tahiri at the same time."
Mara, however, raised an eyebrow. "So why the change of heart?"
Looking back and forth to the expectant crowd, Tenel Ka shook her head. "Some secrets are not mine to share."
"In other words, Anakin's the reason," Mara said wryly.
Tenel Ka showed no reaction, through the Force or otherwise. "You may think that if you wish."
The lack of an outright denial all but confirmed it for those already confused about Tenel Ka's sudden change of heart.
"Tenel Ka," Leia Solo said gently. "If Anakin is involved, I appreciate your loyalty and will not ask you to divulge anything. It's just—please, let me know if there is anything any of us can do to help."
"If there is such a plan in existence, I will let you know," Tenel Ka replied empathetically.
"Wait," Anja said. "I thought that if you became Queen Mother you won't be able to help us get Jacen back."
"That is a fact."
"But why would you take the throne then? I thought you lo-"
"As I have been told by many since arriving on Hapes, the fate of an entire system is more important than the life of one individual," Tenel Ka interrupted. "No matter my feelings…on the issue, I will best serve the galaxy as Queen Mother first, and as a Jedi second."
"Did Anakin tell you that?" Jaina asked curiously.
"No, it is just something I have realized in my contemplations these past few days. Your brother merely confirmed what I already knew."
"So," Zekk said. "What are your plans then? Declare yourself Queen Mother and take control of the fleet?"
"Among other actions, yes. Colonel Jagged Fel?"
"Yes?"
"When the time comes, would you consent to being put in charge of the Hapan Royal Navy?"

Outwardly reflecting none of the surprise he must have been feeling, Jagged bowed his head. "I would, your highness."
Tenel Ka quirked an eyebrow. "I am not Queen Mother yet."
"But you are still royalty," Jagged Fel pointed out. "May I ask why you will not be leading the fleet yourself?"
"You have more experience in matters of space battle," Tenel Ka said. "And I need a trusted commander in charge. As you said, Hapes can ill-afford another 'Fondor'."
"Will you be on the command ship as well?"
"I have another mission that needs my personal supervision. I will, however, be counting on you to keep me alive shortly after it is accomplished." Tenel Ka removed the ring from the holo-projector and handed it to the Clawcraft pilot. "Hand this over to the current commander, she will know what this means."
Jag accepted the ring. "I will leave tonight then."
"Thank you," Tenel Ka said.
"By your leave, Princess Tenel Ka, Master Skywalker," Jagged nodded to the two and headed for the exit.
"Once you're the Queen Mother, does that mean that you'll pardon Anakin?" Anja asked after the hatch closed.
"That is within my power, yes."
"But you won't do it," Mara said, her eyes narrowed.
Tenel Ka impassively turned to her. "No."
"I thought as much." Mara cast a sideways glance at Corran Horn. "I assume that's why Corran was protesting so loudly earlier."
"Mara?" Luke said questioningly.
"If I'm right, Farmboy, our nephew is trying to do something extremely brilliant, yet exceedingly stupid at the same time. Lando, back me up on this."
The businessman took over. "During the course of the trial, there were several things that puzzled me. I like to think of myself as a good judge of character, so when Alema took the stand advocating for a defensive war, I was confused. I may not have known her well, but while I was helping her prepare for the mission to Myrkr, I got the impression that she wasn't a 'wait-around' type of girl."
"Ganner too," Mara continued. "Though he may have originally supported a more aggressive war, his views had changed over time. Don't you find it odd how he acted like a mini-Kyp on the stand, no offense meant Durron."
"None taken," Kyp chuckled. "I wondered why his words sounded so familiar."
"What are you saying?" Zekk said.

"I'm saying that Anakin deliberately had them switch roles as a way of letting us know that he had something planned," Mara replied. "Whatever agenda the trial originally served has been changed to fit this plan."
"Wait, you mean to tell us that both Alema and Ganner know what Anakin's doing?" Jaina said quickly.
Corran was the one who answered, shaking his head. "I don't know what he told them, but I doubt he told them all of his plan. If he did, and they are still going along with it, they have to be crazy."
"And you know what my son is up to?" Han asked the former CorSec officer.
"Your son *and* Tahiri," Corran said darkly. "And believe me, all of you are better off not knowing. Much of his plan is counting on your genuine reactions to the unfolding situation. The only reason why they consulted me in the first place was because they wanted to fine-tune a couple of key points."
"Corran," Han leveled his gaze at the man.
"Han, there is nothing I want more than to tell you and everyone in this room what the end result of his plan is. But if there is even the slightest of hints that you know more than you should, Anakin's life will be in great danger."
"That is a fact," Tenel Ka said in support, earning a startled glance from the older Jedi. "Please, trust Anakin in this. At the moment, his plan is the best possible choice available."
"Corran, Tenel Ka," Mara's forehead was furrowed in thought. "It sounds like Anakin told you his ultimate goal, but he didn't tell you *everything* about his plan."
Corran simply rubbed at his face. "I wouldn't be surprised. What didn't he tell *us*?"
"The reason why Alema and Ganner are speaking out against the Jedi in the first place," Lando answered, looking not at Corran, but at Luke.
"It was not to ensure Anakin's guilt?" Tenel Ka asked, earning surprised gasps from a few.
Lando shook his head. "It's far more complicated than that. Anakin, Alema, and Ganner have been driving one point home over and over again throughout the trial. Like I said earlier, he hijacked and repurposed the trial. The proof that his plan is working is in the news reports."
"News reports?" Han asked.
"Yes," Lando said. "The defection of both Alema and Ganner was big news wasn't it? In fact, they seemed to go out of the way to attract the press."

"Tell me about it," Jaina nodded. "I got tired of Alema's life story after the second time they broadcasted it."
"Thiz one is also tired of hearing their critcizismz," Tesar agreed.
"Exactly," Lando said. "Day and night, both today and yesterday, what have the media groups been focused on, and what *haven't* they been focusing on?"
Everyone went silent at the question, suddenly thinking long and hard. Sure they had grown tired of the countless cameras, reporters, and biased reports. Fed up with how Alema and Ganner seemingly basked in the spotlight, thoroughly enjoying their betrayal. But what was missing from the news reports?
Anja was among the first in the group to realize what her boss was hinting at. "The trial! They haven't been focusing on the trial!"
"What?" Jaina scowled. "That's impossible! Didn't you see all those cameras and reporters in that courtroom?"
"Yes," Anja nodded energetically. "But they only interviewed Alema, Ganner, or Anakin. They either ignored the others or were turned down by one of us. That's why all we're hearing is Ganner and Alema's criticisms about your Jedi Order."
"They have done more than criticize," Mara said, her face adopting a wan expression. "In all their press conferences they take the time to tell the story of at least one Jedi who has fallen in battle. It may be an account filled with accusations against the Jedi Order, but in the end, the story of that Jedi is told in full. Alema began with the story of her sister, and Ganner told the stories of the Jedi who died at Myrkr."
"But what good would that do?" Jaina said, more puzzled than angry as she realized that her brother had more control over the situation than she thought.
It was not Mara or Lando that responded, but Luke. His voice, however, was subdued, and his eyes flashed with pain. "He's trying to fix what I could not."
"Luke?" Han said.
"He's not only trying to show me how weak and divided the Jedi Order is, but he's trying to educate the public about the Jedi as well," Luke murmured. "Alema, Ganner, and to some extent, Anakin, are not criticizing the Order like most of you think. They are trying to tell me that my way of doing things no longer works in a time of galactic war."
Mara placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It's not your fault, Luke. The burden on your shoulders would have crushed a lesser man."
Luke offered a faint smile. "But it is on the verge of crushing me nonetheless, maybe it already has."

"Wait," Leia said, as understanding came to her. "You mean to tell me that Anakin is trying to create a revolution within the Order during the middle of a galactic war?"
"That's one way to put it," Mara said. "Though it really does sound dramatic when you say it like that."
"And what's this about educating the public?" Zekk asked.
"Much of what the public knows about the Jedi are told in holo-vids, legends, and rumor," Lando said, taking over for both Luke and Mara. The latter two seemed to need some time to come to terms with their realizations. "To most everyone without the Force, the Jedi are some mystical order with powers beyond their comprehension who normally transcend the average legal systems. To put it shortly, to them, Jedi are not like everyday people but otherworldly mystics. It's why, when the Yuuzhan Vong called for the galaxy to turn over the Jedi, factions like the Peace Brigade swelled. The general public cannot connect or relate to the Jedi in any way or form. What Anakin is trying to do, through Alema, Ganner, and himself, is show the galaxy just who the Jedi really are and what they believe in. The life stories of the fallen Jedi are to help make the Jedi more relate-able to the general public."
Both Corran and Tenel Ka, who knew of Anakin's end-game, stared at Lando unblinkingly. The others were simply stunned into silence, barely able to say a word as they contemplated the long-term effects of Anakin's plan. Han and Leia, for their part, were a mix of worry and pride. He was their son, but the last time they had let him carry out one of his plans, they had nearly lost him. Yet, they knew it was for the greater good, that only Anakin was in a position to accomplish what even Luke could not.
"So," Jaina began tentatively. "What do we do now?"
"We let Anakin carry out his plan to the end?" Zekk looked to the older Jedi.
"It's the only thing we can do at the moment," Corran said with a tired nod. "With the Vong at our doorstep, our options are really limited."
"Everything will be decided tomorrow then," Kyp summed up, looking grim.
"Then we should pray that the Force is with us," the previously silent Tekli said softly. "From how complicated his plan sounds, I doubt Anakin can afford to have anything go wrong."
|* *|
In orbit around Hapes, cluttered with the massive gridlock of fleeing ships, a larger cargo vessel lumbered. It was a standard model, easily the size of a fighter carrier, but with no weaponry, shields, or armor. It was only one of seven other similar vessels, all in perfect orbit above

the main cities of Hapes. Normally, such vessels would be chalk full of refugees, on an outbound trajectory to the next nearest inhabited system. These vessels, however, continued their innocuous low orbit, waiting for dawn to break above the capital city.
The cargo of these massive ships, however, was far more dangerous than anyone could ever imagine. Since Trisdin's ill-fated meeting with the high priest of Yun-Yammka, his confederates and their Yuuzhan Vong allies had been busy. Though the holds had been empty only hours before, they were now completely full.
"When the sun strikes the planet we will right the wrongs done to our gods!" A Yuuzhan Vong warrior bellowed from a balcony. "The *Jeedai* will fall to us! They will beg us! But, we will crush them beneath our feet! ***Eia tochurok Yun'tchilat! Do-ro'ik vong pratte!"***
Below him, row after row of Yuuzhan Vong warriors began to beat their breast plate with a fist, creating a frightening cacophony of military precision as they begin to chant.
"*Yuu-zhan-vong! Yuu-zhan-vong!"*
The commander's scarred lips twisted into a satisfied sneer. "This will be the last night the Jedi will ever know. In just a few hours, we will rain from the skies. Though our allies on the planet are infidels, they share in our god's vision. Our enemies will fall before us, and we shall be victorious!"
"Yuu-zhan-vong! Yuu-zhan-vong!"
"Tomorrow, the gods will look down upon us favorably. We are the right hand of Yun-Yammka, the amphistaff he uses to cut down his enemies. No other warrior can much us in skill, our brothers are given the honor of protecting the Supreme Overlord himself. We will not fall, we will not fail him! We are *Yuuzhan Vong!*"
The hundreds of soldiers in the hold, standing next to row upon row of specially made drop-pods, thrust their amphistaffs into the air and emitted one last cry.
"*Do-ro'ik vong pratte!"*
I* Chapter End *I
A/N: Well, Anakin can plan all he wants, but it looks like this plan won't even make it through the first stages. Next up, the Yuuzhan Vong and Ni'Korish open up with an all-out war on Hapes. How many times can the title of Queen Mother switch in a single week?
8-7-12: Minor edits.

ADA 5

Five

|**|

Lying on a cot in the heavily guarded med-bay, Tahiri was awoken to the sound of heavy boots clomping through the hallway outside. Stretching and yawning, the young blond teen rubbed at her eyes. She glanced up at the clock, which told her that it was still an hour before sun-up. She closed her eyes and groaned, the clomping boots giving her another reason to hate shoes of any kind. Not being able to tap into the Force due to the three ysalamiri that were kept in the room, she had to wake up naturally. Which, of course, delayed her reaction time when she realized that five men, all dressed in red, were marching through the doorway. One of the two other occupants in the room, a Hapan doctor who had been overseeing both her own and Anakin's recovery, came out of his office at the commotion.

The leader of the red-clad group immediately side-stepped the doctor and wrapped a muscular arm around the man's neck. In another instant there was an audible snapping sound and the doctor went limp. Tahiri immediately took cover behind a large piece of machinery, casting a worried glance in Anakin's direction as she did.

The leader of the group turned to his men. "Alright, let's get the Jedi. The male's still in bacta so we just have to slip the drugs into the feeding system. The female's awake, though without the Force and her lightsaber she should be relatively easy to subdue."

Panic flooded Tahiri's system as they approached Anakin's tank. Panic and anger.

There was no way she was going to let them do anything to him. Glancing about for anything she could use as a weapon, her search stopped at one of the metal poles that made up her cot. Quickly and quietly, she worked the pole free. She may not have access to the Force, but she had trained with Anakin against his 'Vong-bots' and had the knowledge of how the Yuuzhan Vong fought burned into her mind. Her hands gripped the metal pole and she glanced over to the four around Anakin's tank.

She did a quick recount. Five had entered the room.

A shadow loomed over her, and Tahiri quickly struck out with a reverse thrust. The last red-clad man dodged the attack and swung at her with a stun-baton. Tahiri leaped back over the machinery and rolled to the center of the room. The remaining men, recognizing her as a threat, abandoned their efforts at Anakin's tank and moved to surround her. All wielded the same type of stun-batons, though each also had a blaster tucked into their utility belts. Tahiri twirled her makeshift bo-staff around as she cautiously waited for the next attack.

It came from three directions. Whirling, Tahiri avoided the forward thrusts of two attacks, and parried the third. The last two attackers rushed her in the process, but Tahiri dropped down and swept her staff outwards, causing them to stumble. She straightened and twisted to the side, rapping the knuckles of another one of her attackers and causing the head of another to snap back as the tip of her staff slammed into his chin. Keeping the metal pole in constant motion, Tahiri weaved and bobbed around each attack. The most audible sounds in the room were the crackle of the stun batons and the whooshing sound of her staff. She was running on pure adrenaline, knowing only that Anakin would be in danger if she fell. Yet, the several days of inactivity had left her out of shape and her breathing was now coming out in great pants.

The door to the med-bay opened once more, and Tahiri tensed, expecting enemy reinforcements. The new arrival, however, was in fact a bemused Alema Rar. Taking note of Tahiri's sweat-soaked tunic, the dead doctor, the aggressive men surrounding Tahiri, including the one unconscious on the ground, Alema placed her hands on and canted her hips.

"Early morning work-out, Tahiri?"

One of the men went for his blaster, but Alema was quicker. In the blink of an eye, she drew her own sidearm and fired. One, two, three bolts of red slammed into the offender's chest, twisting him around. But Alema didn't stop there. The remaining three men also received several ruby red darts as well, ending their lives in a heartbeat. Giving Tahiri a wink, Alema dramatically blew on the barrel of her blaster, spun the gun around in her hand, and slid it back into its holster.

With the threat over, Tahiri's legs gave out. Using the metal pole as an aid, the young blond Jedi barely avoided collapsing altogether. Sweat dripped from her brow as she gasped for air, and Alema immediately went to her side.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Alema," Tahiri said through gritted teeth. "Keep Anakin safe."

"That's what I've been doing," Alema said with a nod, helping Tahiri into a nearby chair. "Do you need another bacta dip?"

Tahiri shook her head. "Just some rest."

Alema looked around the room in frustration, then with an annoyed roll of her eyes, drew her blaster once more and fired at the ysalamiri. Immediately the Force returned to the young Jedi in the room.

"Thanks," Tahiri managed.

"Never thought I'd hear that word from you," Alema shot back. "Oh, and you woke your boyfriend."

Though Tahiri could feel Anakin's worry, the fact that she could feel him once again was more than enough to help with her rattled nerves. Smiling briefly in his direction, she gave him a thumbs-up.
"I'm fine, Solo. Concentrate on healing yourself so we can get you out of that tank."
Alema snorted. "You just want to see him unclothed. Not that I blame you."
Coloring, Tahiri hissed at Alema. "Go back to that boy-toy of yours, Rar."
"Will one of you explain why Alema had to kill four of the guards?" Anakin called out impatiently.
Both Alema and Tahiri blinked in embarrassment. Alema saw Anakin waiting with an expectant raise of his eyebrows and answered with her usual confidence. "Good question, Anakin. I'll find out in a second."
Moving to the guard Tahiri had rendered unconscious, Alema gripped him by the collar and proceeded to slap him awake. Slowly, the man came to. Then, realizing where he was, immediately started to struggle against Alema's grip. The Twi'lek, however, was not feeling very playful and promptly used the Force to pin him in place.
"Look, your friends are dead. Tell us who sent you and why, and you won't have to join them."
"Eat dung, Jedi!"
Alema licked her lips as she shook her head in exasperation. "You do realize that I'm using the Force to hold you in place. You can tell me willingly, or I'll scramble your brains. Your choice."
"Alema," Anakin said warningly.
"What? You really expect this nerf-for-brains here to give in if we're nice to him? He tried to kill you and Tahiri."
"They had stun-batons. They were probably going to take us somewhere else."
Alema shook her head. "Not going to take that risk, Solo." She then turned her attention back to her captive. "So, have you decided? Scrambled brains, or you telling me, quitting your job, and getting a new life?"
The man's eyes widened and darted to Tahiri in hopes of some sort of reprieve. Tahiri's own green eyes, however, were once again a chlorine-icy shade. "You attack me and Anakin and expect to get away without any consequences? I would do much worse to you."
"Alyssia!" The man blurted. "Lady Alyssia! She's just declared herself Queen Mother and is turning all you Jedi over to the Vong!"
"See, that wasn't so hard," Alema patronizingly patted his cheek. "Now run along. If I run into you again, you're dead."

The man scrambled to his feet, but before he reached the door, Alema sprang up and decapitated him with a stroke of her lightsaber.
"Alema!" Anakin said in surprise.
"I wasn't going to give that idiot another chance to hurt you or Tahiri." Alema said, nonchalantly clipping her lightsaber back to her belt. "If I had come only a couple minutes later, they'd be having fun with her and you'd still be unconscious in that tank. If he sided with the group that allies themselves with the Vong, he's better off dead."
Anakin simply shook his head. "I guess it doesn't matter now. If what he said is true, then we have bigger problems. Alema, Tahiri, I need the two of you to warn the others and…"
"Don't even think about leaving yourself unguarded, Anakin!" Tahiri snapped, her eyes now blazing. "What if another group tries to take you, or worse?"
Before Anakin could argue, however, the panic, confusion, and agitation felt by all the other Jedi rang clearly through the Force.
"Besides, I think the others already know," Alema said dryly.
I* *I
Only minutes earlier, Tenel Ka, Zekk, Anja, and Jaina were walking rapidly through the hallways of the palace, en route to Ta'a Chume's chambers. Their goal was to inform the Hapan matriarch of Tenel Ka's plans to take the throne. Not that plans always unfolded the way they did. As they reached a branch in the hallways, Tenel Ka stopped.
"My friends, Zekk, Anja," Tenel Ka said. "I will be unable to deliver a message to my mother after Ta'a Chume makes the announcement known. If you can, please inform my mother about my plans and tell her that I will be with her as soon as I can."
"Of course," Zekk agreed. "Good luck with your meeting."
"Yes, I will need all the luck I can possibly get."
"We'll see you two later then," Anja said with a wave as she and Zekk started down an alternate passageway.
Tenel Ka and Jaina resumed their own journey. The first hint that something was out of place occurred as they approached Ta'a Chume's quarters. The normally guarded hallway was empty, and the door to Ta'a Chume's room slid open and close, repeatedly hitting the body lying in the middle of the doorway.
Stretching out with the Force, the two women realized that no one living was in the room. Slowly, they stepped over the body. From the angle of the man's head, it was obvious that his neck had been snapped. The lights of the room were off, so they nearly stumbled over two more bodies in the antechamber.

Kneeling by one of them, Tenel Ka examined him carefully. "He was one of Ta'a Chume's bodyguards."
"How was he killed?" Jaina murmured, scanning the surroundings.
"Thrust to the throat, standard Hapan military hand-to-hand combat technique." Tenel Ka examined the other body. "It is the same with this one."
"You're telling me that someone overpowered two of the people Ta'a Chume chose as her personal bodyguard?"
"Three if you count the one we stepped pass," Tenel Ka said. "This does not bode well for her."
The two carefully advanced deeper into the room. The doors to a side chamber containing the bedroom were also ajar. They approached it, a single, flickering light within providing brief glimpses of what they could expect. Once in the bedroom, they saw the one thing they had expected, but dreaded, the body of Ta'a Chume. Lying in bed, with a pillow over her face, it was obvious that she had been smothered. There were no other marks on her body otherwise.
"Who would do this?" Jaina said tersely, removing the pillow and gazing at Ta'a Chume's wide-eyed, vacant, stare.
"Someone else vying for the throne," Tenel Ka replied, staring impassively at the body of her grandmother. "They knew that Ta'a Chume would never accept them so they had her removed."
"But what about..." A clicking noise filled the room, and suddenly a multi-layered forcefield filled the only way out. "What!"
A second later, gas began to pour in from the vents, quickly filling the now enclosed chamber.
"Perhaps," Tenel Ka murmured, trying to cut through the forcefield but with no success. "Perhaps we needed more luck after all."
"How…how do we shut off the forcefield?" Jaina coughed.
"The emitters were placed on the ceiling on the other side," Tenel Ka said, staring through the multi-hued barrier of energy. "We don't."
"Sithspit! I'm fed up with your family!" Jaina jammed her lightsaber into the nearest wall. The duracrete and exotic stones that made up the walls' many layers began to glow from the heat.
"I am not exactly fond of them either," Tenel Ka said, calling on the Force to keep herself conscious.
The two were in the process of cutting through the heavy stone when they suddenly realized that a droid of some sort was on the other side of the forcefield.
"Forcefields, gas, and now an assassin droid?" Jaina groaned.
"At least Anja is correct," Tenel Ka said mildly.
"Huh?"

"This is definitely starting to feel like the old days."
The droid stuck an appendage through the forcefield, and several spherical devices were rolled into the confined room. The droid then backed away as the spheres detonated.
|* *|*
Teneniel Djo's room was a lot more crowded than Zekk or Anja thought, especially since the rays of the sun were only just beginning to shine above the horizon. Aside from the ailing Queen Mother, there were three other redheads helping to serve her breakfast. All three looked up curiously when the two Jedi entered. A younger girl who was probably around ten or so, immediately advanced towards them, a hand on a training baton.
"Who are you?"
"Taryn!" Her doppelganger hissed from beside Teneniel.
The young girl, however, didn't back down and repeated her question, glaring at Zekk. "This is the chamber for the Queen Mother, why are you here?"
"For your first question, my name is Zekk, I'm a Jedi," Zekk motioned to his lightsaber. "Tenel Ka wanted my friend and I to deliver a message to the Queen Mother."
"*You're* a Jedi?" Taryn said skeptically, eyeing Zekk up and down.
"I know he probably doesn't look the part," Anja chuckled. "Don't worry, as soon as we deliver our message, we'll be out of your hair. The name's Anja by the way."
"And you're a Jedi too?"
Anja shook her head. "Sadly, the Force is not with this one at all."
"What is the message you were told to deliver?" the oldest of the three redheads asked. She stepped behind Taryn and put both hands on the younger girl's shoulders.
"Tenel Ka has decided to take the throne," Zekk said calmly. "She wanted to let her mother know that she will be at her side as soon as she can."
"Tenel Ka's finally taking the throne," the older redhead repeated, eyes wide.
"Is that a problem?" Zekk said, sensing the conflict.
The woman, however, shook her head. "No. Well, not for me. My mom's going to be pretty put out that she missed her chance."
"Your mother?" Anja said.
"I'm Tenel Ka's cousin," the woman nodded, before motioning to Taryn and Trista. "As are these two, though they're from the male side of the family."
"My condolences," Zekk inclined his head at Taryn.

Taryn, however, shook her head. "It's okay. When Trista and I get older, we're going to become Tenel Ka's personal bodyguards. Our dad tells us it's less paperwork and headaches than if one of us is actually Queen Mother."
"Is that so?" Anja said with a smile.
"We're already training between our studies," Trista added, stepping to her sister's side. "We know a little bit about how to fire a pistol, use vibroblades, and the basic martial arts of each branch of the Hapan military."
"Already?" Zekk blinked. "How old are the two of you?"
"We'll be eleven in a month," Taryn replied smartly. "How old are *you*?"
"Twenty."
"Twenty?"
"Is there a problem with that?"
"But you look so, so…old."
"Old?" Zekk's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. "Really?"
Taryn put a finger to her chin in thought as she looked Zekk over again, a new found appreciation in her eyes. "Well, maybe not old. Mature is probably a better word."
"Ta-ryn," Trista said with an ever-suffering sigh. "Not again. Just last week it was the captain of the guard."
"Don't worry, I think it's cute," Anja giggled.
"Anja! She's almost ten years younger than me," Zekk pointed out.
"So? In another ten years I doubt you'll care about that difference at all," Anja said brightly.
"We've delivered this message, let's just go," Zekk groaned.
"Whatever you say," Anja grinned. "Later, Taryn, Trista. It was nice meeting you."
Both Jedi turned to leave, only to pause when the doors opened ahead of them. A large number of heavily armed men, clad in red, stormed into the room. There was a split second between them seeing the Jedi and the Jedi registering them, before all hell broke loose.
"Take cover!" Zekk yelled, activating his lightsaber.
Almost simultaneously, over a dozen heavy rifles were brought to bear and opened fire. Superheated metal slugs and lasers stitched the room in a deafening storm. Realizing their true target, Tenel Ka's cousin abruptly leaped between the deadly projectiles and Teneniel, pulling the Queen Mother off and to the side of the bed. Anja, in the meantime, had overturned the dining table and dragged both Taryn and Trista behind it. It provided little cover, as the superheated metal slugs ate away the paper-thin plasti-steel surface.

Zekk, who had been closest to the line of attackers, had no cover at all and was furiously deflecting as many blaster bolts as he could. His clothes were already singed with countless near-misses, and a gash on his shoulder marked the path of a heated slug that had winged him. Seeing Zekk overwhelmed, Anja pulled out the two blasters she had holstered at her side and let loose a torrent of her own. As she did, both Taryn and Trista darted from their meager cover and dove behind Teneniel's bed to join their cousin and the Queen Mother. Moving quickly, Trista depressed a button on the adjacent nightstand and several hold-out blasters were revealed. Keeping one and tossing the other to her sister, they soon added to the allied laser fire.
"Are you two crazy! Get down!" Anja yelled, panicked. A laser burst from one of the attackers nearly took off Trista's head.
"We're supposed to guard the Queen Mother!" Trista yelled back. "Not hide away like some Coruscanti noble!"
"Zekk!" Anja called out.
"On it!" Zekk said through gritted teeth. He slowly sidestepped until he was covering the immediate area of the bed, stopping a majority of enemy fire from getting through. Several lasers that would have hit Taryn were suddenly batted aside by Zekk's iridescent blade. Though the royal family members were now covered, it was Anja who suddenly found herself in a bind.
Her dual blasters were promptly overwhelmed in sheer volume by the heavy repeaters and blaster rifles of the attacking force. Staying behind what was left of the dining table to diminish the attention on her; Anja ejected her spent energy packs and took several deep breaths. Zekk was now pinned in his new position, and both Taryn and Trista were hiding behind the bed, unable to get off a single shot. There were still many attackers left, despite the numerous bodies that now littered the ground. Discarding her blasters, Anja reached to the small of her back and pulled out the same lightsaber she had wielded all those years ago. She stared at it, the din of the fight fading out for a moment.
"Alright Anja, you can do this. It's for a good cause." She closed her eyes. "A good cause."
Steeling her resolve, she grasped it firmly in one hand. As her heart thudded loudly in her ears, Anja reached her free hand up to her implant.
"Ten seconds should be enough," Anja said to herself, tapping several buttons on the implant.
Meanwhile, Zekk clenched his jaw as another laser got by his defenses and hit his shoulder. The pain was intense, but he quickly used the

Force to shuttle it away. Behind him, he could feel the fear emanating from both Taryn and Trista. As brave as they were, no one would have been able to maintain a strong front if they were facing such an onslaught for the first time. Occasionally, they would raise their blaster over the bed and blindly fire several shots, but for the most part, the two kept themselves over Teneniel both to protect her and comfort themselves. If he fell, they would most likely be killed. Yet, unless the enemy fire died down, he could neither advance nor retreat.

The snap hiss of another lightsaber activating created a momentary pause. Almost everyone stared in the direction of the sound and saw Anja standing with her acrid yellow blade.

"Forgetting someone?" Anja smiled, lunging at the nearest attackers with a reaction time that even Zekk found hard to follow.

Not letting the blasterfire pick up again, Zekk launched himself at the opposite end of the line of attackers. Both he and Anja made short work of the guards. Though they may have been deadly at range, their heavy weapons were no good at close quarters. Anja moved like Zekk did, darting in and out and delivering strikes with lethal precision. Emboldened by the success of the two, Taryn and Trista both rose once more and added their own shots. In another couple of seconds, silence once again filled the room.

With a relieved smile, Zekk deactivated his lightsaber and looked to Anja. His expression abruptly changed, however, at what he saw. Though Anja was grinning at him in elation, blood was streaming from her ears and nose. At Zekk's pale complexion Anja reached up and saw her blood covered hand.

"Oh, bantha poodo," Anja murmured, swaying. "Mind calling the docs, I'm going to need them."

Zekk rushed to her side as she collapsed. "Anja!"

"Don't worry, just fried my brain," Anja tried to smirk, but it turned into a wince. "I know I shouldn't have overclocked my implant, but it was the only way we were getting out of this alive."

Zekk placed a hand on Anja's forehead, using the Force to relieve some of the stress that had built up. "Hang in there, alright? We'll have Tekli or Master Cilghal look you over."

"Great idea," Anja managed. "How are Taryn and Trista?"

Zekk looked over his shoulder. The two in question were standing on the opposite side of the bed, staring at Anja worriedly. "It looks like they're alright."

"And Tenel Ka's cousin…" Anja coughed, and then began to shudder. "Damn, I didn't even find out her name."

"I don't think she made it," Zekk murmured.

"Hey Zekk," Anja said.
"Shhhh, save your strength."
"All we need is a cloud car, a submarine, poisonous beasts, and green-haired crime lords, and I'll die happy," Anja said, closing her eyes.
"Anja, stay with me," Zekk said, drawing on more of the Force to keep her stable. "Trista, Taryn, do you think one of you can call a medical team?"
"Already done," Trista said, staring at Anja in fear for her health. "Will she be alright?"
"She should," Zekk tried to put on a brave face. "Believe it or not, we've been through situations worse than this before."
Suddenly, the palace comm-system blared to life.
"All members of the Hapan Royal Guard, Hapan Royal Navy, and Elite Forces, by order of Queen Mother Alyssia, you are to arrest any Jedi immediately. If they resist, you are authorized to use lethal force. Repeat, Queen Mother Alyssia has ordered the apprehension of any and all Jedi. The one exception is that Tenel Ka is to be killed on sight. Failure to follow these orders will result in serious repercussions for Hapes as a whole. Furthermore, the Ni'Korish faction is now legalized and will be our liaison with our new ally, the High Priest Naazar. Long live the Queen Mother, long live the Yuuzhan Vong!"
Glancing out the balcony, Zekk saw the sky light up as hundreds upon hundreds of meteor-like rocks hurled towards the ground. Several of the large rocks slammed into the palace with a thunderous roar, shaking the very ground.
"By the Force!" Zekk gaped. "They're actually letting the Vong onto the planet!"
The ceiling of the room unexpectedly tore apart as something crashed through it, and Zekk reflexively covered Anja's limp form as debris flew everywhere. Covered in a sheet of dust, Zekk saw fragments of rock and twisted metal all around. Mixed with those fragments, however, were large chunks of yorik coral. Slowly, Zekk's gaze panned upwards, settling on the pod-like device that had crashed through the ceiling. The pod opened, and Zekk swallowed as the biggest, most heavily scarred Vong he had ever seen emerged. The warrior was not carrying the standard amphistaff, but two smaller versions that, despite their size, looked much more deadly.
"Have you been in worse situations than this?" Trista whispered, wide-eyed at the massive alien.
"It's getting there." Standing, Zekk levitated Anja out of the way, but summoned her lightsaber into his other hand. His use of the Force was not lost on the massive warrior in front of him.

"*Jeedai,*" The warrior snarled.
"Welcome to Hapes," Zekk replied mildly, activating both Anja's yellow, and his own green blade.
No further words were exchanged as the warrior's twin tsaisi released a thick spray of acidic poison. Where the droplets landed on Zekk's clothes, they steamed and burned through the thin cloth. Zekk retaliated by using the Force to hurl several sizable chunks of debris at the warrior. He might as well have been throwing pebbles. The warrior, bare-fisted, utterly annihilated the slabs of rock thrown at him, then charged like a raging rancor. Zekk whirled aside, and the true fight began.
Used to fighting the tsaisi's longer cousin, Zekk had to swiftly change his fighting style. That fact was emphasized by a near-miss, when the fangs of one of the tsaisi tore a large, diagonal swath of clothing from over his chest. Zekk spun about, green and yellow blades landing in a swirling arc of death. The warrior, however, was skilled, and not only parried or dodged each and every attack, but was also able to launch several of his own. A thick cloud of dust billowed up around them, swirling with every swing and motion of the two combatants locked within. Kicks, thrusts, slices, jumps, the two moved back and forth through the Queen Mother's quarters, seemingly evenly matched.
The warrior pushed away from Zekk and leaped up onto his drop pod, before leaping again, this time onto a bent ceiling beam. Zekk severed the base of the beam, but the warrior again jumped as the beam came crashing down. Within moments, he had established a position onto the roof.
Using the Force, Zekk followed. He landed and just barely blocked the warrior's immediate attack. The warrior's tsaisi released another stream of venom, but Zekk was ready and leaped backwards to evade it. The warrior charged forward once more as Zekk's feet touched the surface of the roof; catching the Jedi off-guard in a vicious shoulder-tackle. Though Zekk's lightsaber was knocked loose and rolled down the side of the domed rooftop, he managed to keep a hold of Anja's. He swiftly jammed the blade into the shoulder of the warrior on top of him, but again it did more harm than good.
The warrior snarled, but didn't relent. Instead, the warrior gripped Zekk's arms, with one of his large hands pinning Zekk's weapon in place. With his other hand, he raised a tsaisi for a killing blow. A single blaster bolt flew out of nowhere and grazed the warrior's hand. More out of surprise than anything else, the warrior dropped the raised weapon. Zekk and the warrior took a brief moment to look to the

source of the blasterfire and saw Taryn, still in the process of climbing onto the rooftop, but holding a blaster in a steady hand.
The warrior, still pinning Zekk, reached into a pouch and pulled out what Zekk recognized was a razor bug.
"Taryn!" Zekk yelled in warning.
The bug was sent flying at the young girl, whose eyes grew round in shock. With an effort borne out of desperation, Zekk used the Force to shove Taryn out of the way. Though the razor bug missed her, Zekk's efforts had the unfortunate side effect of sending her rolling down the domed-rooftop. Even then, some of the training she had mentioned earlier must have kicked in, because she once more aimed her blaster and fired off several shots. Just before she reached the bottom of the dome, she discarded her blaster and gripped onto the small ledge with all her might.
One of her shots winged the elbow of the arm the warrior had been using to restrain Zekk. It was a small wound, but it was all Zekk needed as he managed to throw the large warrior off of him and roll away. Panting heavily, Zekk shed the remains of his ruined Jedi tunic and readjusted his grip on Anja's lightsaber. The warrior likewise held up his remaining tsaisi and matched Zekk's stance, seemingly unconcerned with the numerous wounds that had been inflicted on him.
The warrior flexed both of his hands, and howled pain as four lethal claws, two on each hand, tore through his skin and extended outwards. The massive warrior tore off his vonduun breastplate, revealing a very chiseled physique, and drew his new claws across his chest, deliberately leaving trails of blood.
Snarling at Zekk, as trails of blood traveled down his torso, the warrior took up a fighting stance. *"Tchurokk Yun'Tchilat!"*
Zekk at that moment, missed his lightsaber more than anything. The warrior once again advanced first. Feet scampering quickly, even on the slanted ground. Claws sliced through the air, followed by a spinning attack with a tsaisi, then claws again. Gradually, Zekk was forced down the side of the dome, only capable of parrying each attack. Even the small blows he managed to inflict with his lightsaber only seemed to spur the warrior onwards. Realizing that he wouldn't be able to win offensively or defensively, Zekk switched tactics. As he was pushed further and further down the dome, he began to slice at the tiling that covered it. Only second later, though, Zekk was forced onto the narrow ledge at the very end of the dome's slope. The warrior leered down from above, holding out both claws towards Zekk.
"You meet your end here, *Jeedai*!"

Zekk deactivated his lightsaber and closed his eyes. "You first."
The warrior once again moved to inflict a fatal blow, then stumbled as the ground beneath him began to move.
"What trickery is this?"
Zekk didn't respond, choosing instead to concentrate in the Force as he literally began to tear a large portion of the roof away. The lightsaber marks he had left on his trek down had weakened the rock beneath the tile and were now enabling him to pull the section free. The Force may not affect the Vong, but it could still affect the environment around them. The warrior was unable to regain his footing and began to slide downwards as Zekk tilted the loose rock over the edge. With one final scream of defiance, the warrior was deposited off the side of the building with the rest of the debris, flailing away as he did. The downward journey was halted by a thin spiky, spire that pierced the warrior's heart and killed him instantly.
Releasing his breath, Zekk swayed from exhaustion, momentarily forgetting where he was and nearly falling off the roof as well. A small hand, however, caught him, and pulled him back in. Blinking, Zekk looked at his would-be rescuer. "Taryn?"
The younger girl nodded absently, staring, almost dazed, at the missing section of roof, then back to the glistening, dust-covered, bare-chested Zekk. She swallowed, licked her lips, and then nodded resolutely. "Okay, I'll admit it. You're a Jedi."
|* *|
"This isn't good," a grim-faced Captain Livette muttered, monitoring a bank of computer screens in the palace's control room.
Mara, watching the same screens, nodded. "Lady Alyssia must have been planning this for a while. Her people have taken out the planetary defense grid, communications, and the palace's defense shields. We have armored divisions firing on each other, and all space-flight has been grounded."
"Not to mention the hundreds of Yuuzhan Vong they have running around," Han said, motioning to the body of a large warrior in the doorway. No matter how elite, that particular Vong had the misfortune of facing four Jedi Masters and went down rather quickly. "Do we have a final count on those drop pods?"
Livette double-checked a screen. "Over three-hundred and fifty landed in this city. Before communications were cut, other cities had been reporting numbers ranging anywhere from ten to a hundred."
"Any sign of a Vong fleet?" Kyp asked worriedly.

"The last reports from our observers were that the fleet was still massing. The more worrying thing though is that the space above Hapes is still full of refugee ships. Not all are on outbound trajectories."
"Great, that means we haven't even gotten to the worst of it yet."
"At least not all of the military is supporting her," Luke pointed out. "The continuous firefights in the city are evidence that she has, at best, a shaky hold on her power."
"So Alyssia allied with the Vong to help her with her coup," Mara summarized.
"And we're what she promised the Vong in return," Corran muttered. "Do you think Cilghal, Lowbacca, and Tesar have reached the others yet? Now would *not* be a good time for them to play prisoner."
|* *|
"Anakin, I know you initially planned for the Vong to take you prisoner, but are you really going to stick with that idea?"
"I don't like saying this, but I agree," Tahiri nodded, trying to keep up with Anakin's long stride. "The *Yuuzhan* Vong don't usually ask questions first. What are you going to say that will make any difference?"
"'I'm Anakin Solo, please take me prisoner'?" Anakin flinched at the gazes the two women gave him. "Besides, chances are that they've now taken Jaina and Tenel Ka. If I don't do something, Jaina has that 'twin-ness' factor working against her."
"It doesn't always have to come down to you, Anakin," Tahiri groaned. "There's a reason I criticized your hero-complex during the trial."
"Then what do you suggest?"
"Get our lightsabers back."
"And kill Vong."
"We can concentrate on saving Jacen and Jaina another day. For now, we just have to make it through today," Tahiri said, entreating Anakin to understand.
"Fine," Anakin sighed. "I'll…"
"Jedi Rar!" A female voice interrupted Anakin.
Alema blinked in recognition. "The woman by the lake."
"Brisha Syo," the red-haired woman nodded. "Oh good, and Anakin and Tahiri are with you. I managed to retrieve these."
From her cloak, she pulled out both Anakin and Tahiri's sabers.
"Where did you get these?" Alema asked.
"Not everyone in the galaxy is against Anakin Solo," Brisha said. "In fact, some have taken a great interest in supporting him and his family."
"Thank you," Anakin said solemnly.

"No, *Anakin*," Brisha replied. "Thank *you*. I retrieved your weapons because we have a big problem."
"I know, the Vong are everywhere."
"They're part of the problem," Brisha nodded. "One of the Yuuzhan Vong vessels has landed on the southern landing pad and their people are taking both your sister and the Hapan princess to it. Unfortunately, a Ni'Korish vessel has landed on the northern landing pad and they're loading up several hundred Hapan children. Both are going to take off shortly so we only have time to get to one. What should we do?"
"We should go after your sister," Alema said quickly. "The Vong have millions of slaves, and they keep them alive. You know what will happen if they manage to get Jaina to Coruscant."
"You hypocrite," Tahiri said heatedly. "After everything you said in the trial about saving and protecting, you want to abandon those children and let them face the same terrors as countless others?"
"At least they'll be alive."
"Anakin," Brisha said hurriedly. "Which do you choose to save? A group of strangers, or your sister?"
Anakin was slightly unnerved by the situation, and by the glint in Brisha's eyes. On one hand, he could understand Tahiri's point. Why would he condemn others to the same horrors she had gone through? Yet, his mind floated back to his sister, if he didn't save Jaina, there was no telling what might happen. Glancing back and forth between Tahiri and Alema, Anakin made a choice.
"We'll go after the others," Anakin said softly, silently praying that he wasn't making a mistake. "The entire idea of the trial was to have the public learn about the Jedi. To show that we care about them and will protect them. What message will we be sending if abandon them to save our own?"
"But Anakin!" Alema protested. "She's your *sister*! Why in blue blazes would you abandon her to the Vong!"
"I'm not," Anakin said, already beginning to move towards the northern landing pad. "Once we free the children, we'll hijack the Ni'Korish vessel and intercept the ship Jaina's on."
"Then I wish you luck," Brisha said, bowing her head. "May the Force be with you."
"You're not coming with us?"
"I am afraid that I'm not much of a fighter. But I will help out where I can," Brisha bowed once more before moving hurriedly in the opposite direction.
The trio resumed their sprint towards the northern landing platform.

"Are you sure about this, Anakin?" Alema said, once again voicing her concerns. "If you and your sister's situations were reversed, you *know* she'd be coming after you first."
"The main difference is, if I rescued her first and told her that I abandoned a shipload of kids for her, she'd whack me on the head and tell me that I was an idiot," Anakin said dryly. "We are Jedi for a reason."
"Jedi back each other up," Alema pointed out.
"Jedi also protect the helpless. Are you saying that my sister is helpless?"
"I'm not suicidal," Alema remarked, shaking her head. "I understand what you're saying, Anakin, but you always make things a lot harder than they should be."
"Says the blue Twi'lek who went along with his stupid plan in the first place," Tahiri said.
"Like you wouldn't have, Veila. That's how the two of you got a three day stay in bacta in the first place."
"And where were you? Were you going to let him get himself killed?"
"He wanted to sacrifice himself," Alema shrugged, with absolutely no energy.
Tahiri, sensing her change in demeanor, held back any further comment. She didn't know what to make of the Twi'lek. At times, Alema was completely aloof. Then, there were other moments when her darker side surfaced and she dealt out death like there was no tomorrow. There were also rare moments of vulnerability that Tahiri only saw when Alema was near Anakin. Alema was an enigma to her, but it was clear that Anakin understood at least some part of the blue-skinned Jedi. Thinking about Anakin had Tahiri realize that something was bothering him.
She stopped in her tracks. "Anakin?"
Anakin had closed his eyes, his hand gripping his lambent lightsaber. "Yuuzhan Vong, two of them. They're heading this way."
"That Vongsense is creepy, but useful," Alema commented, activating her silver lightsaber.
"Only two, that's odd," Tahiri said, a blue glow filling the hallway as she activated her own blade.
"Only two," Anakin confirmed.
Moments past and the two warriors Anakin had predicted became visible at the end of the hallway. Their large, heavily scarred, heavily tattooed, forms dwarfed the three teenage Jedi. Tahiri, seeing them, emitted a gasp.
"*Ukla-na vissa crai! Yammka'tchilat!"*

"Tahiri?" Anakin glanced at her, feeling her Force-presence change.
"Eia pryozzo Khattazz'Yammka!" Tahiri replied, almost growling.
"Tahiri!" Anakin reached to her through the Force, and couldn't feel her. Before panic set in, another idea crossed his mind. He reached out to her again, this time through his lightsaber, with his Vongsense. He inhaled sharply, he could sense her again. But how? Why?
He brushed his mind against hers, and she seemed just as surprised as he was. Some part of her retreated, and he could suddenly feel her through the Force again.
For her part, Tahiri shook her head, as if trying to clear it. Alema, meanwhile, had placed herself between the two massive warriors and her friends. "You okay Tahiri?"
Rubbing at the scars on her forehead, Tahiri replied. "Yeah, sorry if I scared you."
"It'll take more than vongspeak to do that, Vong Girl," Alema replied. "Any idea what you were saying?"
Tahiri glanced back up at the two warriors, both of whom were continuing their slow pace down the hallway. "Closest translation? Those guys are avatars of Yun-Yammka, the Will of Yun-Yammka. A group of three thousand or so Yuuzhan Vong warriors devoted completely to the warrior god. They eat, breath, and sleep combat training. They're even bred for their size and intelligence. They fill the ranks of the Supreme Overlord's personal bodyguard."
"The Vong equivalent of commandos?"
"Commandos who were raised from birth to kill," Tahiri confirmed. "Watch out for their body modifications, attacking them will be like attacking a walking tank."
"We're going to need more room to fight them, then," Anakin said, looking around. "If they're as deadly as you say, we'll be cut down in this hallway."
"Anakin, we have to get to those prisoners before they're taken off-world. Alema and I will handle these two, you get to the landing pad."
"We will?" Alema blinked.
"Are you sure, Tahiri?"
"Trust me," she grinned, though her eyes were cooling once more.
Anakin deactivated his saber. "Alright then, take care."
"You too."
As one, the three Jedi charged at the warriors. At the last moment, both Alema and Tahiri flipped backwards, while Anakin flipped over the heads of the warriors. Unfortunately, one decided to chase him, while the other stood in the middle of the hallway preventing Alema and Tahiri from advancing.

"Well, that didn't work," Alema said wryly.
"At least we only have to deal with one of them."
"How dangerous did you say these guys were again? He doesn't even have an amphistaff."
Almost in response, the warrior growled and pulled out a massive coufee from behind him. The coufee was easily the size of his body, with jagged edges that seemed to move back and forth of their own volition.
"Great, he has a giant sword. You block, I'll attack."
"Wait, Alema!"
Tahiri had no choice but to dart forward as Alema sprinted towards the warrior. Though the blond managed to block the massive blade, claws erupted from the warrior's off-hand and nearly skewered the Twi'lek. As it was, she managed to pull back with a trio of nasty looking cuts on her midriff.
"I told you every part of them was a weapon," Tahiri said.
Alema gripped her wound, glaring at the warrior. "Then how do we kill a walking tank?"
"Take out its legs?"
"The Vong has his crab-armor even down there."
"With bug-bites?"
"It will take too long."
"Stab him in the face?"
"Now you're talking."
The two women raised their lightsabers again, but this time it was the warrior's turn to attack. He charged through the hallway whirling his blade in front of him. Both Tahiri and Alema were forced to block bone-shaking hit after hit as they were pushed back. One particularly hard blow caused Alema to drop her lightsaber, and she would have been sliced in two if Tahiri hadn't jumped in between the attack. This meant, however, that Tahiri received a diagonal slash across her own stomach.
"Thanks," Alema said, shaking her head and summoning her lightsaber back to her.
"Just be grateful those claws aren't the poisonous type."
The warrior kept up his onslaught, and eventually both women were pushed back into a greenhouse-arboretum type chamber. A fountain in the middle of the room bubbled, while various plants stretched up towards the transparent ceiling to catch the morning light. The serenity of the room was disturbed when both Alema and Tahiri were sent flying through a dividing wall and into the fountain.

Wincing, both just managed to dive out of the way as the warrior bifurcated the fountain's central statue. The two darted to either side of the warrior, who took up the challenge by holding his claws in one direction, and his blade in the other. They circled him, waiting for an opening.
A twitch of a muscle.
Tahiri moved first, lashing out at the extended coufee and then using the Force to splash water in the warrior's face. A heartbeat later, Alema darted along the side of the warrior's outstretched arm and proceeded to remove the warrior's clawed hand with a swift, upwards stroke of her saber. An arm spike jutted out, skinning the top of Alema's shoulder, and Alema retaliated by removing the rest of the warrior's arm.
Tahiri continued to distract the warrior by sending a steady stream of water at his face, weaving around his ineffectual attempts to attack her. Eventually the warrior managed to turn away from the stream of water and charge at Tahiri at a speed that belayed his size. But it was too little too late. Tahiri dropped to a knee and drove her blade directly into the chin of the warrior. Her own blue blade glowed out the top of the warrior's head as the Vong let out a gurgle, before falling limp.
Alema, seeing the warrior drop to the ground, simply fell back into the fountain in relief. "I don't want to face another one of those in a while."
Tahiri, who was likewise winded and wounded, could only nod as she took in great gulps of air. Despite her fatigue, however, she began to walk back towards the northern landing platform.
"Tahiri? Oh, you can't be serious!"
"Anakin just got out of a bacta tank. How long do you think he'll last against someone as strong as the warrior we just faced?"
"Fine, fine, I'm coming."
"You don't have to, you know."
"What and miss a chance to kill another super-Vong."
"It's Yuuzhan Vong."
"Whatever, Vong Girl."
"Go back to the fountain and drown yourself."
"Hey, you just got out of the bacta yourself. If it weren't for the Force, you'd probably be fast asleep by now."
They approached the landing platform and their banter trailed off. All was silent. Tahiri quickly reached out for Anakin, and exhaled when she felt his response.
"Don't tell me he's finished already!" Alema blinked.
The two emerged out into the morning sun and blinked at the scene. Several soldiers in red were on the ground, unconscious, and a pair of

legs that had once belonged to a Yuuzhan Vong warrior, were all that was left of said warrior. The top parts of the legs were completely charred, with scorch marks decorating the landing pad around it, leaving both women to wonder what Anakin had done. The hatch to the transport ship on the platform opened, and Anakin quickly waved at them.
"Come on, we don't have much time."
"How'd you reduce tall, dark, and ugly to a pair of legs?" Alema chirped as she accepted Anakin's hand and allowed him to pull her into the ship.
Anakin looked embarrassed. "I knew I was in no shape to fight, so I kind of moved the transport over him."
"What?"
"When I got here, the ship was in the process of landing. I just used the Force and had the landing thrusters take care of the rest."
"I can't believe I missed that."
"What about the children?"
"I told them to run," Anakin replied, piloting the vessel around the palace.
From their view, they could see the firefights occurring all throughout the city. Explosions blossomed, and bolts of red and green, accented by plasma and magma projectiles streaked everywhere. It was a sight to behold and it would have been beautiful if it wasn't so deadly.
"Hey, isn't that Zekk?" Alema pointed towards the top of part of the palace.
"Open the hatch," Anakin directed, bringing the ship towards the shattered dome.
"Looks like he had a fun time with one of Yun-Yammka's warriors too," Tahiri remarked at the destruction.
"How'd he lose his shirt?" Alema blinked.
Zekk was in the process of Force-assisted trance to heal and rejuvenate his body when felt familiar presences rapidly approaching. Puzzled as to how they could be coming from above, he opened his eyes and saw a transport ship hovering right in front of him. Blinking, he shook his head. "Only you, Anakin. Only you."
The ship pulled up alongside him and Taryn, and the hatch opened.
"Jedi Taxi Service, on a mission to rescue Jaina and Tenel Ka," Tahiri called out brightly, then noticed the red-headed girl supporting the barely-clothed Zekk. "Oh, who's your friend?"
"She's Taryn, and she's staying here," Zekk said.
The outburst came as expected. "Jedi Zekk, she said Tenel Ka needed rescuing…"

"And you and your sister can do all the rescuing you want when you're older."
"I saved your life."
"And I'm thankful," Zekk said. "But this isn't your fight. I need you to help your sister look after Anja."
Taryn still looked rebellious, but finally relented. "Fine, but you better come back."
To the surprise, amusement, and chagrin of all present, Taryn gave Zekk a quick kiss on the cheek, before scampering back into Teneniel's ruined quarters.
"Really Zekk, a kid?" Alema teased, helping Zekk into the ship. "No wonder you turned down my advances."
"Weren't we going to rescue Jaina?" Zekk said loudly, catching himself as the ship jolted into motion.
As the cargo ship finally approached the southern landing pad, nothing was what the occupants had expected. Multiple lightsabers were visible from their position, as were the hulking figures of several warriors. A single ship, definitely Vong in origin and about the size of the *Trickster*, was in the process of taking off. From the desperation of those on the ground, it was clear Jaina and Tenel Ka were aboard.
Anakin quickly redirected their transport to a parallel course above the Vong ship, able to keep up only because they were still in Hapes' atmosphere.
"Zekk, Alema, Tahiri, prepare to board the Vong ship!" Anakin yelled, setting the autopilot.
"We're boarding the Vong ship?" Zekk repeated in disbelief, then he groaned when Anakin opened the ship's hatch and let in a rush of air. Muttering to himself, Zekk moved into position. "Of course, we're boarding the Vong ship."
"I told Tahiri you weren't allowed to plan things anymore," Alema said, looking down at the Vong ship below.
"Anyone with a better idea, speak them now."
When the others simply joined Zekk at the doorway, Anakin offered them a cocky, Solo-smile. "Regret joining us, Zekk?"
"Ask me after this is over."
Anakin chuckled, moving over to Tahiri. He cupped her face and looked at her questioningly. Flushing, she accepted a short kiss, before pushing at his chest and stepping away. "Any more Solo and I won't be able to think straight."
"One more for luck?'
"Arghh, let's just do this already!" Alema groaned, leaping out of the fast moving transport.

"See you below," Zekk agreed, following the Twi'lek.
"One more," Tahiri said, giving him a brief peck before jumping as well. Anakin followed immediately after her, falling barely a second before landing on the yorik-coral top. Already the atmosphere was thinning, and Anakin knew he didn't have long before they entered outer space. Which was very bad for the health of those not enclosed in vacuum suits or Givin. Fortunately, the others had found one of the ship's hatches and were motioning him over.
They wasted little time in entering the Yuuzhan Vong version of the airlock, taking a brief respite from their exertions.
"Suicide mission, check. Crazy plan to get the Hero of the Republic captured, check. Jumping out of a ship several kilometers in the air and infiltrating a Vong vessel, check. Dying an uneventful life, unable to fulfill," Alema muttered, panting but with a wide smile on her face.
"Are you sure the Vong don't know we're here?" Zekk looked over to Tahiri, who nodded in turn.
"When their ships are about to exit or re-enter an atmosphere, the outer hull develops a protective coating to numb it from the extreme temperature shifts. This leaves a small window where the sensors aren't as accurate. It's a spaceship, not an airship after all."
"At least Jaina and Tenel Ka are onboard," Anakin said, opening his eyes. "There are also about two dozen Vong as well. I don't know if they're the warrior type or not."
"A ship this size would have a crew of about a dozen, with three or four Shamed Ones managing the grutchin or dovin basal," Tahiri supplied.
"Great, so we either have shapers or more super-Vong," Alema said.
"Super-Vong?" Zekk raised an eyebrow.
"Like the one that robbed you of your shirt," Alema answered.
Zekk winced. "Too bad I can't get him to pay for a new one."
"We have to get to the bridge quickly and vent the rest of the ship of its atmosphere," Anakin said. "Hopefully we can cause everyone else to pass out from the lack of oxygen."
"The ship won't like that, and it might not survive." Tahiri replied. "It'd be like exposing your internal organs to space."
"We have no choice, unless we want to face a dozen of Yun-Yammka's avatars."
"To the bridge it is," Zekk said grimly. "I take it we won't kill unless we have to?"
"Yeah," Anakin nodded. "Though it'll probably come down to that in the end. Definitely leave any unscarred Vong alone. Got that Alema?"
Alema waved a hand. "Don't worry, I'll leave your worshippers alone."
"Worshippers?"

"I'll explain later," Tahiri muttered.
Anakin took her for her word. "Okay, we've gotten the hard part out of the way, now we just have to take this ship."
"After we take the ship, what do we do then?" Zekk asked.
"We continue my original plan. We rescue Jacen."
|* *|
"Jedi Master Horn! You need to take a look at this!"
Corran hurried to the technician's side. "What is it?"
"Sir, we were tracking that Vong ship you asked us to follow. Look!"
He only had to view the footage once to let loose every single explicative he knew. A second viewing had him questioning the sanity of the Solo-Skywalker line.
"What's wrong, Corran?" Han Solo said, looking up from his data pad. "I haven't heard those Corellian words in a long while."
"Just look," Corran said, gesturing to the monitor while shaking his head.
Han watched the footage, and his jaw dropped. "What in blazes is Anakin doing there! Isn't he supposed to be in a bacta tank!"
Of course, Han's outburst literally brought the Hapan situation room to a grinding halt.
"From your statement, I take it he's no longer in a bacta tank?" Luke said mildly. He instinctively reached out for his nephew and found him tired but excited.
Han punched up the footage onto every screen available. "You call *that*, a bacta tank!"
"That looks like Tahiri, Zekk, and Alema," Tekli pointed out. "At least he's not alone."
"What's the situation on the forces loyal to Alyssia?" Mara called out. "Were they monitoring that ship too?"
"Uncertain," one of the techs replied. "Most of her people are busy fighting garrisons loyal to Queen Mother Teneniel. They have the upper hand at the moment, but they may still be busy trying to consolidate their power."
"We have to do something," Mara clenched her jaw. "If the Vong realize another one of their ships has been hijacked by Jedi, they'll blow it away!"
"But what can we do?" Captain Livette motioned to the monitor. "Princess Tenel Ka is the direct blood descendant of the Queen Mother, only she would be able to successfully challenge Lady Alyssia's claim."
Kyp Durron's voice crackled over the comm-system, specially set up to bypassing the jamming. *"This is Durron, Lowbacca, Tesar, and I have been forced to fall back. Those warriors are too good. We've lost*

several members of the security force and the Vong have control over the upper levels of the palace. Requesting further orders."
"Jedi Durron, this is Captain Livette. At the moment, Lady Alyssia does not have any air-support. Meet my people down in the hanger and you might be able to circumvent any Vong blockade."
"Affirmative, on our way."
"Will your plan work?" Han asked quickly, not liking the fact that all three of his children were once more in mortal danger.
"It's like I said," Captain Livette said grimly. "Even if they do manage to reclaim the throne room, Hapes will still be without a strong leader to unite the splintered factions. The presence of the Vong only complicates matters. To end this, we need an alternative leader."
Suddenly, quite unexpectedly, a new voice came over the palace-wide comm-system. *"This is Queen Mother Teneniel Djo, all forces will cease combat operations immediately. We will not squabble amongst each other while vultures wait to feed off our corpses. All of us are proud Hapans. You should not be turning your weapons against each other, but against those who seek to take our very identity from us. Already, members of the royal family lay slain at Alyssia's hand. Already, invaders who have slaughtered countless others throughout the galaxy, have begun their reign of terror here. I may not be fully recovered from my illness, but I am still the Queen Mother and I order everyone to lay down their arms now!"*
"The Queen Mother!"
"Quick, where is she transmitting from!"
"We have to get to her before Alyssia's people do!"
"Ma'am, we have a problem!"
"Another one!"
"Ma'am, over a hundred of those Vong are marching on the palace, with the dozen or so already inside, our security forces won't be able to repel them."
Mara placed a hand on the tech's shoulder. "That's our job, corporal. You just find your Queen Mother and restore order before the Vong fleet arrives."
There was an awed silence as the Jedi in the room moved as one.
"But there's only six of you," protested Captain Livette.
"Then you better find the Queen Mother quickly," Tekli murmured, following Cilghal out the door.
"Really quick," Ganner said congenially.
"We'll get right on it," Han said, nodding to Luke.
Leia likewise waved. "Be careful."

Once Mara, Corran, Tekli, Cilghal, and Luke left the room, Han turned back to the rows of stunned technicians. "Well? Don't just sit there gaping like some slack-jawed moisture farmer! We have a queen to find!"

|* *|*

For once, things worked out like they were supposed to. The crew on the bridge of the Yuuzhan Vong vessel was absolutely dumbfounded by the sight of four Jedi, one shirtless and two in hospital clothing, bursting into the room with lightsabers active. After Tahiri barked a few commands, everyone surrendered. A quick interview of the crew and a few questions later, revealed that the ship did indeed hold several of the elite warriors, but not as many as the group had feared. Only four remained onboard, all guarding the prisoners. The others were priests of Yun-Harla and shapers. When pressed, the captain reluctantly admitted that there were also two Shamed Ones present as well. Tahiri then sealed off the bridge, emptied the rest of the ship of oxygen, just long enough for everyone to pass out, and sealed the ship completely.

"Okay, Zekk, you can go get my sister," Anakin said lightly. "She'll probably be a little delirious from the lack of oxygen, but should otherwise be in good shape. Alema, think you can handle Tenel Ka?" Both went off to do his bidding, though Anakin could definitely feel the amusement from both Tahiri and Alema.

"I'm forgetting something, aren't I?" Anakin said to the grinning Tahiri, who was currently in the pilot's chair.

"Only if you don't mind having Jaina wake up with a half-naked Zekk in front of her."

"Oh, I don't mind, it's why I sent him in the first place."

"Don't approve of a certain Clawcraft pilot?"

"Jagged's okay. But, let's just say I like the idea of childhood friends getting together."

"I do too." Tahiri agreed perkily.

Anakin knew he had a stupid grin on his face, but after rescuing his sister and their friend, a small bit of pressure had melted away. "We still on course for the rest of the fleet?"

"Yes. We're leaving the Hapes system." Tahiri nodded. "In fact we should be able to see them right about…Suns! That a lot of ships." Anakin gazed out of the viewport and saw pretty much every type of Vong ship imaginable. Coralskippers, by the dozen, swooped between rows of dreadnaughts and heavier cruisers. All that was missing was a World Ship.

"There's no way Hapes can hold that off," Tahiri whispered.

"Let's hope my sister's favorite Clawcraft pilot is as good at commanding fleets as he is a pilot."
"Hailing Stalking Claw, from the Dread Song. Dread Song to Stalking Claw."
Tahiri looked at the villip, then motioned to one of the bridge crew. "Free that one so he can answer."
"Well he cooperate?" Anakin asked, loosening the Vong's bindings.
"He will," Tahiri replied, then barked another order in vongspeak.
The freed crew member approached the villip cluster.
"Tell them that we have urgent news for the Supreme Overlord," Anakin said, with Tahiri translating.
"The Dread Song's commander is asking us what is so urgent that we are eager to leave the coming battle," Tahiri said quickly.
"Tell him that if the Supreme Overlord deems him worthy of the news that he will find out that way."
"The Dread Song is threatening to board us."
Anakin wet his lips as he nodded. "Tell him that if he does, the Overlord will be extremely upset that he delayed the delivery of the heretic who claims the title Yun-Harla."
There was a long silence after the bridge member reiterated the message. Finally, there was a reply, though it sounded extremely harsh, violent, and rather long-winded. Tahiri listened to it, before smirking.
"We have permission to leave the fleet."
"Was that what he said?" Anakin asked in amusement.
"More or less," Tahiri answered. "It was more along the lines of, 'you stink like the dung of a maggot fly. Go, before you befoul the space around my presence any longer and do not complain about not being able to take part in the glorious fall of Hapes.'"
"Your version was definitely more eloquent," Anakin chuckled. "Very well, we should do as the commander ordered."
"Setting course for Coruscant."
"Is there a reason why the bridge crewman helped us?"
"His sister was a Shamed One," Tahiri answered, a slight spike of anger coursing through their bond. "The commander of this vessel killed her after she threatened to reveal that he had forced himself onto her."
"He just told you this, just like that?"
Tahiri hesitated a moment. "He…he told me that he heard the stories of the *Jeedai*. That we were supposed to be the redeemers of the Shamed Ones. He doesn't know if it's true, but he said that he had nothing else to lose."

Anakin glanced at the offending commander, who, despite not having a tizowyrm, seemed to realize what was being said, and let out a string of Vong at the turncoat crewmember.
"Not even going to translate that," Tahiri said darkly. "Can we just space him?"
Anakin shook his head. "Can our new friend pilot us through hyperspace? I want to ask a few more questions."
"Sure," Tahiri held a quick conversation, and then ceded the pilot's chair to the crewmember. "What'd ya wanna ask?"
"Ask the crewmembers here if they've heard of the stories about us?"
"Anakin?"
"I'm just curious about something. Alema mentioned earlier that the Shamed Ones saw us as gods, right?"
"More like a physical incarnation, but yes."
"Ask the crew members if they've heard the stories and if they believe as the Shamed Ones do."
Tahiri relayed the message, then listened to the various responses. One of them seemed to take a long while to respond. Whatever he was saying must have been something since Tahiri's jaw simply dropped. When he finished, Tahiri turned to Anakin, bewildered. "Oh."
"Oh?"
"It's not just the Shamed Ones," Tahiri said softly. "There are whispers at every caste level. Though most of the crew here doesn't believe in the whispers, they know others who do. There are even stories of Yuuzhan Vong with the same power as the *Jeedai*."
"Wait, what!"
"That crewmember there said that he recalled a tale told by his great-grandfather when he was little. It's a very old legend, and he doesn't really believe in it, but apparently, the Yuuzhan Vong were once capable of using a variation of what we call the Force. They were known as the Ur-Yuuzhan Vong and they managed to build a great empire on Yuuzhan'tar. One day, a long-distance scouting vessel came back from observing the ummm…I guess Never-Ending Empire is the closest translation. The crew members were not aware of it at the time, but they had contracted some sort of disease. When they rejoined the rest of the Ur-Yuuzhan Vong, this disease spread. Those who fell ill lost the ability to maintain their implants and scars, but worse yet, they also loss their ability to use their powers. The disease devastated the entire population within years, chaos broke out, and those who lost their powers were said to have been punished by the gods and were given the title Shamed Ones. Occasionally, there are still whispers and stories, that one or two may have kept their abilities,

but nothing was ever proven." Tahiri said absently, seemingly still in shock.
Anakin simply gaped at Tahiri, lost for words. He worked his jaw several times, but his still couldn't form any coherent thought. Tahiri likewise was unusually silent, staring at the huddled bridge crew in a new light.
"How widespread is this story?" Anakin finally managed.
Tahiri mechanically repeated his question, then shook her head. "He doesn't know. It's considered a heresy to even know it."
Anakin rubbed at his forehead as exhaustion set in. "I wouldn't be surprised. If known, it would undermine their entire social order."
As distracted as Tahiri had been by the story, when Anakin's very unsuccessful attempts to actively hide his tiredness from her actually disappeared altogether, the blond teen rose from her crouched position. "Get some rest Anakin. Running around after getting out of a bacta tank isn't a good idea."
"But something…"
"Anakin. Rest. Now!"
"I agree with Tahiri."
Anakin swallowed at the not-so-happy voice of his sister. "Hey Jaya."
"Anakin," Jaina said curtly.
"Zekk wake you up?"
Jaina's eyes narrowed. "It was you?"
"He didn't protest." Anakin replied with a cheerful grin, seeing the aforementioned Jedi hastily emerging from behind his sister and taking a seat in one of the bridge's chairs.
"You…!" Jaina quickly shook herself as recalled what Zekk had told her of Anakin's plan. "Never mind that! What in the Emperor's black bones are you doing out of the bacta tank! You shouldn't even be up and about much less hijacking Vong ships!"
"You wanted me to let the Vong capture you?"
"You're my younger brother for Sith's sake!" Jaina practically shouted, not caring that the Vong bridge crew was staring at them. "How do you think I feel, Anakin? You nearly died on Myrkr protecting me, and now here you are again, risking your life for me! Risking your life to save Jacen!"
"You're my sister," Anakin said softly. "You can't ask me *not* to save you. It's the same reason why we're going after Jacen right now. If I'm supposed to be this great hero everyone wants me to be, it'd be pretty pointless if I couldn't protect the two of you."
Jaina's jaw worked several time, and she shook her head. Eventually, she simply leaned against the nearest wall. In a much gentler voice,

Jaina looked to her younger brother. "Anakin, you don't have to be a hero. Jacen and I would be perfectly happy if you were simply Anakin, our younger brother."
Anakin bowed his head. "I know, and you don't know how much that means to me—"
"But to be Anakin, our younger brother, you also have to be that hero everyone wants. You wouldn't be you otherwise," Jaina finished, her pain clear in her voice.
"Yeah."
"Don't let it go to your head."
"You think Tahiri would let it?" Anakin replied with a ghost of a smile.
Seeing the younger teen gazing emotionally at Anakin, Jaina reached out and gently nudged her. Tahiri, in turn, quickly glanced back to Jaina uncertainly. This was, after all, the first time the three of them were in any state to talk since the events on Myrkr. Sensing Tahiri's need for some sort of reassurance, that Jaina approved of her and Anakin's relationship, Jaina echoed Anakin's faint smile and jerked her head in the direction of her brother. "We'll keep this idiot alive, yeah?"
Tahiri swallowed and took one of Anakin's hands in her own. "Of course."
"We all will, Jaina." Alema entered the bridge with Tenel Ka close behind.
Jaina acknowledged the Twi'lek with a faint nod. Though she now knew that Alema had been acting on instructions from Anakin, it was still hard to forgive her for what she had said during his trial. A spike of weariness transferred from her brother to the others, prompting Jaina to immediately roll her eyes.
"Okay, enough, Little Brother. As your older sister, I'm ordering both you and Tahiri to take one of the back rooms and get some rest. The rest of us can handle it from here."
"Are you sure?"
Jaina looked pointedly at the young blond at her brother's side.
"Tahiri."
"Come on, dummy. All this excitement is about to make *me* collapse too," Tahiri half dragged Anakin back to his feet, and proceeded to pull him towards the doorway. "I only just got out of the bacta tank too, you know."
"We won't get to Coruscant for at least another seven hours," Jaina said. "So make sure you're well rested. If you get hurt again, mom and dad are definitely going to ground me."

Finally giving in to the demands of his exhausted body, Anakin nodded and offered no resistance. Only minutes later he was fast asleep, oblivious to the chaos breaking out on Hapes.
I* Chapter End *I
A/N: Happy Holidays to all!
8-7-12: Edited for minor grammar, spelling and word choice issues.

ADA 6

Six
I**I
The members of the Royal Hapan Palace Guard, who hadn't already defected to Alyssia or weren't otherwise occupied, took up positions all around the entryway and front steps; an array of blasters pointed towards the distant gates. Automated turrets also emerged from the shrubbery that lined the walkway up to the palace. Standing amongst the almost hundred-strong group of soldiers were six Jedi, vigilant and clearly aware of the approaching threat. It was not even mid-day, yet the sun felt unusually warm by all.
Silence.
Then, everyone could hear it. A guttural chanting accompanied by rhythmic pounding. The noise grew louder, the words distinguishable but alien.
"Krel os'a hmi va ta! Rrish krea Yuuzhan'tar! Rrish krea Yun-Yamm-ka! Krel os'a hmi va ta!" Over and over the words were repeated, growing in strength and volume.
The Palace Guardsmen, though they were professional soldiers, swallowed nervously at the fearless and menacing nature of the chant. The words, coupled with the rhythmic thumping, caused hearts to race and sweat to form on their brows.
"Control," Ganner held up his comlink. "Final count on approaching enemy?"
"Exact count unknown."
"Unknown?"
"We are receiving reports that Vong from pods dropped in nearby towns have made their way over here. Expect numbers in excess of two hundred."
Ganner's eyebrows shot up. "I copy."
The front of the formation of the approaching Yuuzhan Vong could now be seen, with a row of large warriors leading the way. The rows behind the first were staggered, reaching almost twenty deep in some parts of

the formation. It was immediately clear, however, that these were not just ordinary warriors.
"Since when did the Vong start using shields?" Mara was barely able to conceal her alarm.
"Since now?" Ganner was likewise attempting to remain calm, but failing. "We didn't see any on Myrkr."
The shields in question were made of yorik coral, and though they had an obvious defensive purpose, the spikes on the outer surface and along the edges were very deadly looking. The body-sized shields were only held by the warriors in the first three rows, but their mere presence was enough to give the Jedi pause.
"Krel os'a hmi va ta! Rrish krea Yuuzhan'tar! Rrish krea Yun-Yamm-ka!"
The massive formation of Yuuzhan Vong warriors continued to bellow their war cries, coming to a stop just outside the palace's perimeter walls. There they stood, pounding the ground with the ends of their body-sized shields or banging on their vonduun-crab breastplates, but making no further move to advance.
"*Control to Jedi Rhysode! Get everyone inside now! Ni'Korish assault transports are inbound and we still don't have access to the palace's shields!"*
Ganner had no sooner received the alert when a storm of destructive energy ripped through the courtyard and walkway of the palace. The plant-life went up in smoke and anti-personnel turrets were vaporized in the laser-bombardment. A missile streaked down from above and obliterated the main gate in a thunderous roar.
The Jedi and the Palace Guard scrambled to abandon their entrenched positions as the bombardment continued. One E-Web heavy-blaster crew didn't move fast enough, and disappeared under a barrage of laser fire. Fragments of stone and grains of dirt flew everywhere during what would be the longest five minutes of the battle, as the courtyard was torn to shreds. Then, the deafening roar of the bombardment ended as several human-made assault shuttles started their final approach.
"*This is your rightful queen, Queen Mother Alyssia,"* the city-wide comm-system belted out. *"You cannot possibly hope to win this fight. Only I am strong enough to lead Hapes into a new era. All those who dare to raise arms against the Queen Mother of Hapes will surrender now, or face severe punishment."*
In the background, the Yuuzhan Vong's intimidating chants could still be heard, the ranks of the warriors advancing past the destroyed outer walls of the palace complex. At the same time, the troop transports

touched down, disgorging waves of red-clad, heavily armed soldiers into the courtyard.
"It almost looks like every single member of the Ni'Korish is out there," Ganner said, impressed by the show of force.
"They are pretty confident in a victory," Tekli agreed, as she and the rest of the Jedi backed out of the entry corridor and into the atrium. The palace guard quickly set up in defensive positions all along the grand staircase at the back of the room, and ducked behind fluted columns that ringed the atrium. The Jedi spread themselves towards the front of the room, ready to intercept any projectiles or blaster bolts. The tension in the air grew as the Yuuzhan Vong warriors resumed their chanting. The rhythm was slower than previous, but no less intimidating.
"Head's up, they're beginning their attack!" Corran called out in warning.
Marching rhythmically, the hulking profiles of five, shield-carrying Vong filled the entryway. With every step, they pounded the ground with the spikes at the end of their massive shields. Behind them, were a row of five more warriors, all armed with chitin carbines, and behind them, to the alarm of everyone, were seven or so members of the Ni'Korish armed with heavy blasters. Five more shielded warriors followed, and the pattern repeated as invaders made their way through the hallway. As they neared the atrium, the Yuuzhan Vong warriors all cried out at once.
"*Do-ro'ik vong pratte!"* The invaders stopped their slow advance and charged.
"Open fire!" The Palace Guard's commander yelled.
A hundred blasters lit up the air of the atrium in a mixture of red and green lights, pounding the advancing invaders mercilessly. The yorik coral shields proved to be effective in shrugging off the brunt of the wave, but the defenders were not done yet. Wave after wave of deadly bolts of red and green pounded away at the shields.
The invaders returned fire. Razor bugs, thud bugs, and repeater shots flew out of the narrow entryway. Yet, the hundred plus blasters they faced in opposition, overwhelmed what little fire they could muster. The front five shield-bearers held out at first, but then several well-aimed headshots dropped them one by one. The Vong immediately behind them, as well as their human allies, were cut to pieces in a heartbeat. Still, more warriors and Ni'Korish soldiers pushed forward. Heavy ordinance ripped free from the back of their lines, a deadly combination of rockets and blast bugs that tore massive gouges out of the grand staircase and the pillars of the atrium. Debris rained through

the air, followed by more deafening explosions. The numbers of the palace guard began to drop under the intensity of the rapidly forming firestorm.
The direct assault was taking its toll on the Ni'Korish and Yuuzhan Vong invaders, but eventually, they managed to flood into the atrium in sufficient enough numbers to force close quarter combat. Some of the Ni'Korish threw aside their blasters and pulled out vibroblades as they charged the Palace Guardsmen by the lower register of columns. Two guardsmen who rushed to meet the challenge were immediately plastered against the wall by a vicious swing of a Vong shield. The warrior, however, was then dropped by a volley of blaster fire, which was then silenced by the screeching of a blast bug detonating.
Laser fire still streaked back and forth through the dust covered air, while thud bugs and razor bugs burst from the cloud with deadly efficiency. The Jedi were now fully engaged with the Yuuzhan Vong warriors, the hues of their lightsaber blades whirling and blurring as they fought several enemies simultaneously.
Ganner staggered backwards from the sheer force of a Vong shield being slammed into his saber. He only just recovered when an opportunistic Ni'Korish soldier tried to skewer him with a vibroblade. In desperation, Ganner lifted the man into the air and hurled him at his Vong opponent. The resulting mess had the Ni'Korish soldier impaled on the shield's spiky surface, adding to the weight of the already heavy shield. The warrior discarding the barrier and advanced, lethal-looking blades emerging from each of his hands. A long-blaster roared and blew a hole through the vonduun crab armor. A second shot dropped the warrior before he reached Ganner. Not that Ganner had any time to rest, as he was quickly forced to leap away from another charging warrior.
Luke, in the meantime, was contending with three warriors and countless Ni'Korish taking potshots at him. The fame of being the Grandmaster of the Jedi Order sometimes brought unwanted attention. His green saber flashed all around him, sparking as it came in contact with the amphistaff of one of the warriors. The other two quickly closed in with their shields, attempting to box him in. Fortunately for Luke, a Ni'Korish soldier chose that moment to fire several shots at him. Luke deflected the blaster bolts into the head of the amphistaff-wielding Vong and darted free as the warrior dropped to the ground. He outmaneuvered one of the shield-carrying warriors, slicing off the arm that was holding the massive barrier, before swiftly decapitating him. More laser fire, two of which he couldn't block without getting skewed by the remaining warrior's shield.

Mara, feeling his pain from the blaster burns on his side and arm, launched herself over the battlefield and promptly dispatched the Ni'Korish shooters with lethal efficiency. She then hurled her lightsaber at a low angle, slicing off the feet of the remaining shield-bearing Vong. The saber flew back to her hand, and she ended the warrior's life. Moving to Luke's side, she scowled at him briefly.
"You *trying* to get yourself killed, Farmboy?"
Luke chuckled, using the Force to purge the pain from his body. He would need healing later, but there was only so much one could do in a battle. "That's why I have you around, Mara."
Another explosion, this time Tekli was lifted off her feet and flung through the air. Cilghal quickly caught her apprentice and began to retreat back up the pock-marked grand-staircase. On the opposite side of the atrium, a pinned down Corran Horn had painfully absorbed the energy from several blaster bolts. Injured as he was, he was now in a position to unleash that built up energy.
As several Ni'Korish and amphistaff-wielding Vong rushed forward, Corran let out a breath and thrust his hand towards them. A powerful wave of wind blasted his attackers, rocking the Vong warriors backwards and completely lifting the Ni'Korish members off their feet and throwing them across the room. Several Palace Guardsmen took advantage of this and laid down covering fire for Corran, picking off all the enemy combatants who had been affected.
Slowly but surely the Ni'Korish and their allies filled the atrium, forcing the defenders back up the grand-staircase. Ganner, who was nursing a rapidly purpling cut, winced as he held up his comlink.
"Master Durron, we could use some good news."
"*Funny, I was about to say the same thing."*
"Not going well?"
"*Both Tesar and Lowbacca are out of the fight, those smaller amphistaffs really have one helluva bite. I think we've taken out all but a couple of Alyssia's Vong warriors, but she still has another fifty or so of the Palace Guard loyal to her and a handful of security droids. Without reinforcements, it's doubtful we can take the throne room. How about you?"*
"We're in a waist-deep pile of bantha poodo," Ganner remarked dryly, nodding his thanks to Cilghal as the healer stemmed the spreading poison in his wound. "We're falling back for now, but we took out a sizable chunk of their forces. It's now all a matter of who runs out of people first."
"Great, I'll try to keep you informed, but...Force!"
"Master Durron?"

"We've found Queen Mother Teneniel Djo! She's up here…and it looks like she's heading straight for the throne room. Blast it! You five, come with me! Ganner, let everyone else know, Tenel Ka's mom is up here!"
|* *|
Kyp hastily pocketed his comlink as Teneniel walked by them. She was dressed not in Hapan noble clothing, but a rancor-leather Dathomiri outfit very much like the one her daughter wore. Her long hair flowed freely behind her, fluttering with every step she took. His alarm at not having sensed her approach was only doubled by what he *did* sense. Absolutely nothing. It was as if the little feelers he had put out were promptly absorbed by the woman in front of him.
"You have nothing to fear, my Jedi friend." Teneniel said, without looking back.
"If you say so." Kyp hastened to keep up with Teneniel's long strides. "There are still a couple of Vong warriors by the throne room. We can't get through with the numbers we have."
The said numbers were five very exhausted members of Captain's Livette's squad. The evidence of their progress, however, was clear in the number of bodies that littered the way from which they had come. But that progress had come at a price. The remaining members of Livette's unit were either dead, or like Lowbacca and Tesar, receiving emergency medical treatments to purge their bodies of the Yuuzhan Vong toxins.
"We will make do with what we have."
"But…"
"There is a reason Dathomir has yet to fall to these invaders," Teneniel interrupted. "I may be the Queen Mother, but I am also a daughter of the Singing Mountain Clan."
The small team rounded the corner. A single Yuuzhan Vong warrior, backed by a dozen men in red, immediately whirled around to face them.
"The Teneniel Djo!" One of the Ni'Korish gasped.
"Jedi bitch! Shoot them!"
Teneniel, however, took a step forward and inhaled deeply. Kyp's jaw dropped as the dozen individuals began to spasm and twitch, and then nearly vanish from the Force completely. The twelve collapsed to the ground, still alive, but no longer cognizant of the world around them.
"What…what was that?" Kyp swallowed.
"I do not know. It simply felt…right." Teneniel's answered unnerved him, as did the tingle of power he suddenly felt from her.
The Yuuzhan Vong warrior recovered from his stunned stupor, caused by the instant elimination of his backup, and immediately raised his

amphistaff in challenge. Teneniel thrust out her hand, and a burst of wind lifted the warrior off his feet. The warrior swirled around at a dizzying speed, completely immobilized. Though immune from direct Force attacks, just like the warrior Zekk had faced, this one was at the mercy of the environment surrounding him.
Seeing Kyp's expression, Teneniel inclined her head towards the spinning warrior. "*That*is the Spell of Storm."
"So it is."
Teneniel's lightsaber fell into her free hand, and in a series of fluid moves, Teneniel activated her saber and flung it into the helpless warrior; impaling him through his chest. She recalled her blade and dispelled the cyclone, before decapitating the warrior as he dropped to the ground. The entire encounter, Ni'Korish and all, took less than thirty seconds.
Kyp gaped at the bodies that littered the ground, while the Royal Guardsmen stared at Teneniel with a hint of reverence. Teneniel said nothing as she stepped around the still forms and continued towards the throne room. It was obvious nothing was going to stop Teneniel from confronting her would-be usurper.
When Teneniel rounded the next corner, and blaster fire broke out, Kyp swore and sprinted to join her. He needn't have bothered. Six more Ni'Korish soldiers were on the ground, comatose. Teneniel was standing over the last of them, her lightsaber still active in her free hand.
"Your highness?"
"I do not feel as empty as before," Teneniel murmured, nearly inaudibly. "But this is still not enough."
"Your highness," Kyp repeated, louder than before, bending to check vital signs. "I don't know what you did to these men, but I don't think you should do it anymore. It is really similar to a Dark Side technique that I know of."
"Similar, but different, they are alive, are they not?"
Kyp closed his mouth, unable to argue the point. Even if it was clear that the men would never actually be 'alive' after whatever had happened to them, their organs still functioned. On one hand, their presences were nearly completely removed from the Force. On the other, Teneniel was right in pointing out that they still had a hint of life in them. Even more, for the first time since she had first walked by him, he could feel Teneniel in the Force. Albeit her presence was fainter than those on the ground, but he could definitely feel her.
"We should continue on, their allies will have heard the blaster fire and will be preparing for our approach."

"There's still at least four more Vong left," Kyp cautioned.
"Spell of Storm is capable of entrapping multiple individuals."
"Oh. That's helpful."
"Indeed."
"But I do not believe that I can use the fullest extent of my abilities. Eliminating the one warrior left me severely drained."
Kyp did a double-take. "You did a very good job of hiding it. Is this where I come in?"
"Yes, I will be able to immobilize, at most, two at a time. You will have to deal with the other two, while Captain Livette's people will deal with the Ni'Korish."
"Great, two elite Vong," Kyp loosened his lightsaber from its holder. "Hopefully they'll be spread out between here and the throne room and we won't have to use those tactics."
They turned a corner.
"Or not. Right, your strategy will work just fine," Kyp groaned, activating his blade.
All four remaining warriors were in a single line, with three twirling amphistaffs, while the remaining warrior wielding two coufee. Behind them, spread all along the hallway back to the throne room, were the remaining Ni'Korish soldiers, blasters at the ready.
Without warning, two warriors were buffeted by powerful Force-generated winds and promptly swept into swirling vortexes. Kyp darted forward with the aid of the Force, slicing through the coufee-wielding immobilized warrior before the Ni'Korish had even begun firing. The remaining warriors, excluding the one still caught in a vortex, split up, with one charging Teneniel and the other backing Kyp up against the nearest wall. The Ni'Korish also opened fire, lighting up the hallway in red.
Kyp, in the meantime, did his best not to breathe in the warrior's foul breath, using every ounce of strength he had to keep from being flattened against the wall.
"Die *Jeedai!"* The warrior growled, the top of the amphistaff going limp so its head could snake around Kyp's blade.
"Oh, come on," Kyp grunted, jerking his head to the side to avoid a spray of venom. "That's just cheap!"
Claws began to emerge from the warrior's hand, and Kyp had the wind driven from him as he was slammed against the hard, rock surface of the wall. With his lightsaber immobilized by the warrior's amphistaff, Kyp was hard pressed to keep the claws from cutting into him. All around, Ni'Korish lasers burned into the wall behind him, pinning him in.

"Do you…really think," Kyp gasped from the pressure exerted against him. "That…you…are…the only one….with more than one weapon?"
At that, Kyp promptly dropped to the ground and under the amphistaff. He pulled out a blaster and shoved it under the armored plating at the warrior's waist. The blaster whined several time, and the warrior completely stiffened, his eyes bulging as a very important part of him was superheated by bolts of high-intensity energy.
Kyp holstered the blaster and used the warrior as a shield for oncoming Ni'Korish fire. "Sorry, but I play dirty."
Shoving the laser-stitched warrior away, Kyp dispatched the remaining immobilized Vong warrior and raced after the one engaging Teneniel. Fortunately, the remaining members of Livette's squad had dealt with the charging warrior through judicious use of blaster fire. Unfortunately, some of them had been felled by Ni'Korish blaster fire. As he deflected the steady stream of blaster fire heading their way, Kyp steadily advanced. Teneniel's own blade flashed, batting aside laser bolts and sending them back at their points of origin.
Kyp held out a hand, blasting the Ni'Korish with a powerful Force Wave. With the front of their formation smashed, the Ni'Korish began to pull back into the throne room itself. Ray-shielding went up in front of the door, and the hallway became silent once more.
"Now what?"
"Hand me your comlink." Kyp did as he was told. "Captain Livette, cut all power to the upper levels."
"*Cutting power and disabling backup generators. But, your Highness, reinforcements are en route. Please do not do anything rash."*
"Reinforcements will not be needed, send them to assist the other Jedi."
"*Your Highness!"*
"That is an order, Captain Livette."
"*Understood."*As Livette responded, the lighting in the hallway went dark. As did the ray-shielding that blocked the doorway.
Seeing this, Teneniel nodded grimly. "It is time to end this."
|* *|
A massive explosion ripped a marbled column in two as the Ni'Korish and Yuuzhan Vong alliance pressed forward. Bodies were pitched over an already downed chunk of wall, flopping lifeless, to the ground. Blasterfire flew back and forth through the hallway, accentuated by a relentless storm of Yuuzhan Vong projectiles. More people fell, with neither side willing to give any more room. The cacophony within the enclosed hallway was ear-splitting as the shrieking of blasters went on almost non-stop.

Ganner, Mara, and Corran whirled about in the middle of it all, their sabers flashing left and right in deadly arcs. Cilghal had fallen back to care for the wounded, which included her apprentice and Luke. Fortunately, Captain Livette herself, as well as everyone she in reserve had joined the fight, creating a temporary boost in their side's fire-power.

"When do you think Anakin and the others are coming back?" Han called out over the din. "We could really use their blades right about now!"

Corran winced, nearly missing a blaster bolt aimed for his head. "If he's doing what I think he's doing, they won't be back for a good day or so."

"A day?" Han picked off a rocket-launcher wielding Ni'Korish just as the red-clad soldier pulled the trigger. The rocket detonated at the man's feet and the resulting explosion created a temporary hole in the enemy lines. "Why do they need a day to get back out of orbit!"

Corran used the brief drop in enemy fire to pull several wounded soldiers to safety. "If Anakin's sticking to his plan, he's going to try and rescue Jacen."

"What!"

As Corran began to respond, a fresh line of shield-bearing Yuuzhan Vong charged through the smoke-filled air. But the defenders had quickly adapted to this strategy early on in the fight. A storm of blasterfire attempted to bring down the battering-ram formation. A long blaster roared, taking off the head of one. A thermal detonator lobbed by one of the Palace Guardsmen flew through the air and was caught by Ganner in a Force cushion, who then expertly shuttled it into place for maximum effect. Since the shields were blocking the view of the warriors, they didn't see the silver orb until it was too late. The warriors who were staggered by the blast were peppered by even more laser fire, before the Jedi leaped into action, cleaving apart the disorientated Vong with expert precision.

Enemy blasterfire picked up again, and the Jedi pulled back, deflecting what they could. Corran, who had dropped back to Han's side, winced as he felt the man fume.

"Horn, are you telling me that Anakin and Jaina are heading into Vong space *again*!"

"Probably." Corran silently wondered if his own hair would become as grey as Han's through Jysella and Valin's teenage years.

Han's reply was several of the exact same Corellian curses Corran had used earlier. The aged war-hero then took out his frustrations by laying a systematic field of fire down the hallway. "And you just let him do it?"

"He was in bacta, should have been for at least another day." Corran's even voice only seemed to aggravate Han further.
"Those are my *kids* we're taking about Corran! This war shouldn't be *their* war!"
"They may be your kids, but they are also Jedi," Corran pointed out, deflecting a laser back to its sender. "No matter how young they are, it *is* their war just as much as it is our own."
"You don't think I know that!" Han blasted a Vong in the face. "How would *you* feel if it were *your* children taking off to who knows where."
"I'd feel the same as you, probably," Corran blocked another wave of lasers. "But in a way, I am grateful to your children. It will be because of them that Jysella and Valin won't *have to* enter this war. When Anakin and the others get back, I'm thinking about taking both him and Tahiri as my apprentices."
Han cast a sidelong glance at the Jedi Master. "At the same time?"
"My thank you gift to them, and maybe it will keep them out of trouble."
"They *are* coming back, right?"
"I can only trust in the Force that they will."
"I guess that's the only thing I can do, huh," Han muttered, a distant expression on his face. "Fine time for me to start believing in something greater."
"You don't have to force yourself."
"Don't remind me." An explosion nearby caused both of them to drop to the ground. "But I either do that or give myself an ulcer worrying about those kids."
"Speaking from personal experience, you still get ulcers anyways," Corran said dryly.
"That's just great," Han allowed the other man to help him back to his feet. "Then what good is your Force?"
"It gets rid of the pain caused by the ulcers," Corran, absorbed several blaster hits. He winced and then caused an illusion that he was collapsing the walls of the hallway. Though the Vong were unaffected, the Ni'Korish panicked and leaped from their positions of cover, where they were promptly picked off.
"There goes my belief in something greater."
Just as suddenly as the attack had begun, silence once more filled the hallway. Crumbling piece of wall collapsed, spewing more dust and debris into the air, but there was no longer any sign that anyone else was coming down the hallway. The Palace Guard and their allies cautiously lowered their weapons. Was the fight truly over?

A distant explosion could be heard, coming from somewhere outside the palace. Then more explosions followed. Anxious seconds ticked by as the sound of intense fighting wafted through the shattered entrance way of the palace. Finally, Livette's personal comlink crackled to life.
"Repeat, Captain Livette, this is Lieutenant Roja Ardana of the Royal Hapan Army, Fifth Armored Division of her majesty, Queen Mother Teneniel Djo. We've taken out the landing shuttles and are currently eliminating the rear guard. Do you copy? Captain Livette?"
Cheers of relief and celebratory laughter immediately broke out at the announcement. Even Livette found it hard not to smile as she answered the hail. "Lieutenant, your assistance is much appreciated. What is your status?"
"We're down to thirty percent operating efficiency, ma'am. The brief civil war really chewed up a lot of good people. Fortunately the Vong armor and shield doesn't seem to hold up so well against tank shells. The remaining Ni'Korish are indicating surrender, what are your orders?"
"Arrest them all, we'll let the rightful Queen Mother decide their fates."
"Understood, see you shortly. Lieutenant Ardana, out."
Livette lowered the comlink and joined the surviving members of the Palace Guard by slumping against the nearest wall in exhaustion. With one last confirmation of an end to hostilities, the relief in the air was palpable. An irate Mirax darted out of her hide-y-hole and frantically examined the multiple burn marks in her husband's clothing, scolding him for deliberately allowing himself to get shot. Mara instantly retreated to her husband's side, while both Han and Leia gazed about the destruction with an almost resigned expression.
"Han, how come we can never have a normal visit on Hapes?"
"Princess, this *is* normal for us," Han chuckled, wrapping his arms around her. "What visit wouldn't be complete without assassins, coups, and the odd intergalactic invasion?"
In the meantime, Ganner stood off to the side, listening to Kyp's report of the other situation.
"Wait, Master Durron. You mean to say that the Queen Mother single-handedly defeated twenty gunmen with some weird Force-power?"
"Exactly, she just walked right up to them, and they collapsed to the ground. They're still alive, but they're not showing any signs of consciousness."
"That sounds like a helpful ability."
"You would think, but I don't even think ***she*** *knows how to use it."*
"You're saying she's doing it on…what? An instinctive level?"

"Exactly. When she went up to Alyssia, she just froze and held out her arms at her side. There was some kind of Force-transfer, and Alyssia just spasmed and went still."
"So…she's dead?"
"Worse, I think. Just like the others, she's an empty shell. Whatever ability the Queen Mother used on her just removed her from the Force."
Ganner took a moment to process Kyp's words. "I'll go ask Master Skywalker about it when he wakes up. He was bit by a smaller amphistaff and Master Cilghal is watching over him right now."
"Alright, good to see things turned out well on your end."
"Yeah, and you got to help Alyssia join the club of shortest-reigning-monarchs. She was Queen Mother for all of six-ish hours."
"Long enough to cause enough trouble, though," Livette said, walking towards Ganner. "With our communications back up, I'm receiving reports from all over the planet. Planetary defenses were sabotaged and are inoperable, our planet-based fighter hangers were bombed, and our sensor grid is still down. We don't even know if the Yuuzhan Vong are in orbit as we speak. To make matters worse, some cities have actually gone over to Alyssia and the Vong."
"Hear that, Kyp?"
"Yes. Her Majesty said that she will make a speech shortly."
"Understood," Ganner received a nod from Livette. "We'll try to keep things under control until then."
"*We'll* try to keep things under control, Jedi Rhysode. *You* will probably collapse shortly unless you get those wounds looked at."
Ganner looked down at himself and noticed several blaster burns, holes where a shield spike had caught him, and a variety of purpling bruises in different shapes. "Oh."
"'Oh' indeed. Now run along. We have precious few Jedi as it is and don't need you dying of neglect."
Ganner gave a brief salute as he half-limped down the hallway towards the make-shift med-ward. Once again he wondered how he got himself in to such a situation, and once again his thoughts took him to the utterly insane Solo family. All families couldn't be as crazy and as risk-prone as the Solo's were, could they?
|* *|
"When I said that I was willing to bring Wraith Squadron onboard, my XO looked at me as if I was crazy. Now I'm already regretting the decision."

"It's good to see you too, Admiral," Face saluted, then took a seat across from the admiral's desk. "Thank you for allowing us to dock here, we're in a bit of a rush."
"It's always a privilege. What can I do for you, Face?"
"You feel like donating your two Imp Deuces and the Nebulon B, as well as guns to outfit the other Star Destroyer we parked outside?" Face deadpanned. "It's for a very good cause."
"Did I say privilege? I meant headache. Remind me to listen to my XO more often." Despite his words, the admiral's smile never left his face. "I take it this is something more important than guarding the refugees out of Coruscant?"
"Hapes, sir."
The admiral clasped his hands on the desk and leaned forward. "Hapes? I am unaware of any Intel Op taking place there."
"New Republic Intel is too busy relocating at the moment," Face said, handing over an information-filled data pad. "But if we do nothing, Hapes falls. Hapes falls, and we lose a powerful ally in that sector. An ally we can't afford to lose. We owe it to them after Fondor."
"What about the millions of refugees streaming out of the core systems? We also have a duty to protect them as well. I can give you the guns for your Star Destroyer, but I can't see what difference my ships will make against the forces you have quoted here."
Face was ready for that particular line of reasoning. "I am sure you are aware that all the Solos and Skywalkers that are not infants or Vong prisoners are also on Hapes? If we surrender them without a fight, what message would that project? Hapes is far from defenseless as well. Though we don't know how well they recovered from Fondor, latest New Republic Intel reports suggest a massive drain on their raw material reserves. My plan is to catch the Vong between the Hapan fleet and our own. Our main goal is to force a quick withdrawal, not slug it out with them."
"You'll be going in with or without the support of my vessels, won't you?"
"Yes, sir."
The admiral let out a breath and glanced at the datapad in his hands, reviewing the data once more. "I would say you're crazy, but you have to be to be in Intel."
"You'll help us, sir?"
"I'll make a deal with you Face. Intel is planning a mission to infiltrate Coruscant and wanted me to pick a team. You make it through Hapes, and I'll give you and your team an all-expenses-paid vacation to the once glorious heart of the Republic."

"How generous, I've always wanted to go back to my apartment and pick up a few things I've left behind."
"Perfect, then you won't mind if I join your little excursion to Hapes?"
"You want to come too, sir?"
The admiral nodded. "I'll leave the Nebulon-B and one Imp Deuce here. But you'll have my Mon Cal and the other Imp Deuce, as well as most of my fighter squadrons. It's been a while since the *Ru Murleen* had any action."
"Thank you, sir."
"I should be saying that, Face. The only reason the politicians haven't forced me into retirement yet, is because they need everyone they can get in this war. Take it from me, don't ever let them promote you."
"It's fortunate I don't have a rank then," Face chuckled.
"Antilles was a smart one, making a squad like yours."
"If we were made only a couple decades earlier, you could have been a Wraith too, sir."
"Are you kidding? I've heard of some of your call signs. If I'd join you kids, I'd be known as 'Rookie One' for the rest of my life!"
"That still *is* your call-sign, isn't it?"
"Don't remind me. I just volunteered to give you half the ships under my command."
"Sorry sir," Face said with a broad grin.
"To tell you the truth, you're actually the second person from New Republic Intel to stop by."
"Second person?"
"Jan Ors and that Jedi partner of hers, Katarn I think it was, swung by only yesterday. They'll be joining you Wraiths on your mission to Coruscant."
"Hedging your bets, admiral?"
The admiral scoffed. "I've had to ever since those damned politicians got my partner killed. You should have seen the last mission they wanted me to handle. Compared to that one, sending a team to Coruscant is a walk in the park."
"And how is that compared to taking care of a Super Star Destroyer in a single TIE-fighter?"
"It was a fancy eyeball, and that was a long time ago, Face. This ship and those war stories are just about all I have left after that disaster in the Braxant sector," the admiral looked out the viewport of his office nostalgically. He continued on, whimsically. "And once I retire, I'll just have those stories."
"No family?"

The admiral's whimsical smile turned bitter. "Any family I might have had died with the very mission that scuttled my career. The only reason why the higher-ups kept me around for so long was because of my blasted status as an Alliance hero."
"You're hoping for one last blaze of glory?" Face said softly.
"Can't think of a better way to go out than protecting an entire system's worth of people from an alien invasion, can you?"
"You're still a hero to many in the Intelligence community, sir. Drayson, in my unit, practically idolizes you and was ecstatic when she learned that we were heading here. Let me tell you, having Bhindi ecstatic about anything besides her job says something."
"Drayson? Is she related to…?"
"She's his daughter, yes."
"That Ghost is probably the only one I'll still let call me 'Rookie One,'" the admiral said with a hint of a smile. "And don't think I don't realize what you're trying to do, Face. But I've made my decision. That datapad you gave me showed that we'd be outnumbered at least seven to one. Even if the Hapans have managed to rebuild some of their fleet, at best, we'll then be facing five to one odds. Your pincer movement, and the element of surprise, should give us an edge, but then it becomes a slugging match. You know as well as I do that we won't all be coming out of this unscathed. Whatever the Jedi have done, they've provoked the mother of all reactions from the Vong."
"They tend to have that result," Face remarked wryly.
"My ships will only have volunteers, and I well expect skeleton crews, so that should minimize our losses. Additionally, the *Ru Murleen* is a next-gen Mon Cal, so she can also take more pounding than anything the Hapans will be able to field. It only makes sense if we use her as bait and draw most of the fire away from the others."
"Admiral…"
"Do me a favor, Face. If the time comes where you have to make a decision, I want you to know where I stand."
Face swallowed, then stood and saluted. "Understood, Admiral."
"Thank you, now get going. I'll have my XO get you the guns you need. If all goes as planned, we should be at Hapes this time tomorrow."
|* *|
Anakin awoke and was vaguely aware of something warm pressed against him. He absently reached at the warm weight, shifting and turning to the side. A pleasant scent filled his nose, and he froze, his mind catching up with the rest of his body.
"Morning, Dummy."

Anakin's eyes flew wide open, and when he registered where his hand was, abruptly yanked it away.
"Sorry!"
"I'm not," Tahiri said, catching his hand before he could withdraw it completely. Blushing slightly, she returned his hand to its previous position, and snuggled closer to him. His arms reflexively tightened their grip around her and Tahiri sighed softly in contentment. "I could get used to this, Solo."
"Tahiri?"
"I'm not taking anything for granted any more, Anakin," Tahiri said softly. She was faced away from him so Anakin couldn't see her expression. "I almost lost you on Myrkr. Almost lost the chance to find out what it was like to actually fall asleep in your arms. To wake up next to you. I…I almost let you go off without kissing you and…"
"Shhh," Anakin murmured, gently squeezing her in a reassuring hug. "Shhh…Tahiri, I'm not going anywhere. I'm still here, *we're* still here."
"I know that…and I know I shouldn't be thinking otherwise, but I keep thinking about that one moment, where we kissed, and then…and then you took off running, you were gone, and…and..."
"Everything will be alright, I promise. On this mission, I won't take any unnecessary risks. I'll listen to you at all times. We're all returning to Hapes. You, me, Jaya, Jacen, everyone," Anakin enfolded her in a soothing blanket of his Force energy, planting a kiss on the top of her head.
In response, Tahiri turned to face him, burying her head into the crook of his shoulder and tucking herself against him. She was quivering ever so slightly, her hand gripping a fistful of his hospital robes as she reached out through their Force-bond to comfort herself. They simply held each other, rocking back and forth as they took solace in the other's company.
Despite everything, with her pressed up so close against him, Anakin was reminded of just how truly thin hospital clothing was. The contour of her warm her body against his, the scent of each other as she burrowed her head against his shoulder and he buried his head in her hair, the feel of each other through the Force; it was all having a warming effect on him.
And on her.
Both blushed, with Tahiri looking up at him with wide green eyes. As open as they were to each other at that moment, both sensed the other's intentions and their lips met in a searing kiss.
Tahiri whimpered, rolling so that she was on top of him, but never breaking their kiss. Anakin wrapped his arms around her, a hand

running up and down her spine, causing her to quiver for a very different reason and arch against him. Her hands slipped under his hospital gown, running across his chest and causing him to groan deeply against her mouth. Just before things became too heated, however, the sound of someone clearing their throat brought both teens crashing down to reality.
"Jaina!" Anakin managed, holding Tahiri to him as he saw his sister in the doorway.
"Anakin," Jaina replied, quirking an eyebrow at the situation.
"Jaina!" Tahiri gasped, tumbling off Anakin in her surprise.
"Tahiri."
"Jaina!" Anakin exclaimed in a different tone, due to where one of Tahiri's knees had landed.
"Anakin?"
"Jaina…"
"Tahiri?"
"We can explain!" Both teenagers blurted at the same time.
Jaina's stern façade cracked, and she smiled tenderly at the pair. "No, it's all right. I just wanted to let the two of you know that we'll be coming out of hyperspace in another ten minutes. Or at least I hope that's what our Vong pilot said."
"Yuuzhan Vong," both Anakin and Tahiri corrected at the same time, startling both Jaina and their selves. Anakin realized that his and Tahiri's Force-bond was still wide open, so he slowly dampened their connection, while Jaina merely rolled her eyes and shook her head.
"Really, do you two need a chaperone, Little Brother?"
At that comment, Tahiri and Anakin broke out into laughter, utterly flummoxing the older Solo.
"Sorry, Jaina. It's just something Corran said to us a while back," Anakin grinned infectiously.
"You two have five minutes," Jaina commented pointedly, turning away. "But if you are going to be doing anything, put up some barriers. You're making some of us jealous."
Three minutes later, a slightly blushing Tahiri and Anakin made their way back onto the bridge. Both Zekk and Tenel Ka were studiously looking out the viewport, while Alema flashed the two of them a lascivious grin. Tahiri glared warningly at the Twi'lek as she headed towards the ship's pilot. A few quick words, and Tahiri looked back to the others.
"We'll be at Yuuzhan'Tar, sorry, Coruscant, in another five minutes. He wants to know if you have any plans."

Anakin blinked when everyone looked pointedly at him. "You do realize that, so far, most of my plans have blown up in my face? Including this one. My original plan was to get captured and have them take me to Jacen."
Jaina paused in thought. "Maybe we can still use that plan."
"Jaina?"
"We have Yuuzhan Vong crew, right? And at least one of them is willing to work with us. Maybe we can act as prisoners of a couple of them, it will help us get by any Vong on the surface without drawing any attention to ourselves."
"We'll just be another group of unfortunate slaves," Zekk said, warming to the idea.
"Would it work, Tahiri?" Anakin looked to her.
Tahiri glanced at the tied-up bridge crew uncertainly. "Our pilot is working with us because he dislikes the commander, but the others might not be so willing."
"There goes that plan," Alema snorted.
"It was worth a shot," Jaina sighed, massaging her forehead.
"No, wait, it might still work," Anakin said. "Tahiri, can you translate something to them?"
"Sure."
"Tell them that we *are* the chosen of Yun-Ne'Shel, Yun-Harla, and Yun-Shuno. That we are returning to Yuuzhan'Tar as is our right. If they doubt us, tell them to explain how we have continuously managed to defy death. How their leaders are powerless to stop us, even when they plan traps for us. Ask them, if their gods truly are with the Supreme Overlord and the warmasters, why they have yet to crush all the infidels and Jedi. Why they let the High Priest of Yun-Harla fall to Jaina. Demand their help in making others see this truth, that their leaders have been lying to them all this time."
"Anakin," Tahiri gasped.
Anakin smiled reassuringly as he then gazed at the captured bridge crew. "Go on, Tahiri. I want to see how they react."
Swallowing, Tahiri nodded and began to relate Anakin's message. Almost at once, some of the Yuuzhan Vong began to spit and snarl, straining against their bonds. Others, however, remained silent, intelligent eyes analyzing their Jedi captors. Amidst all the cursing and hissing, one of the bridge crew spoke softly to Tahiri. The blond teen listened intently, before replying in a series of complicated sounding sentences. More questions were asked, and Tahiri glanced back to Anakin once before responding. It was obvious that the Vong she was talking to was not the only one listening to her replies. Some of those

protesting immediately turned on those talking with Tahiri, their tone suggesting promises of very painful deaths. When the intense discussion wound down, Tahiri took several steadying breaths before turning to the others with a wry grin.
"We have three more volunteers."
"Really?"
"They don't really believe what I told them, but they're willing to reserve judgment until they see proof otherwise. They said that it is not possible for Jedi to be the chosen of the gods, it is a role reserved solely for the Yuuzhan Vong. For us to make that claim means we either speak the truth or we will soon face divine retribution."
"I hope you know what you're doing, Anakin," Jaina said.
"You claimed you were Yun-Harla when you renamed that other ship," Anakin pointed out. "Think of this as doing the same thing, but on a broader scale. The shapers and priests hold their power by perpetuating their religious system. Even the Supreme Overlord and the warmasters use similar propaganda to control both the Shamed Ones and the warrior caste. If we start to sow seeds of doubt, the more victories won by the New Republic, the more chaos it will create for these upper echelons. We simply have to rock the foundations of the Yuuzhan Vong society to topple the top."
"'We simply have to rock the foundations,'" Alema repeated dryly. "Jaina, permission to slap your brother upside the head?"
"Granted." Jaina deadpanned. "Seriously Anakin, do you really think your plan will work?"
"We won't see results for a long while. But when they do start to show, they will show in a big way. Just look at the warriors who have agreed to help us."
"They're willing to give us a chance. So?"
"No, actually *look* at them," Anakin motioned. "If it wasn't for those few scars and a couple of small implants, they *would* be part of the Shamed caste. They are probably treated as inferiors to the others and have just been looking for a reason to doubt the system they are in. They won't be the only ones. Tahiri, I'm not sure if you know the answer or not, but about how many Shamed Ones would there be on a Yuuzhan Vong capital ship?"
Tahiri frowned in thought, her green eyes cooling for a fraction of a second before becoming lively once more. "It depends, it could range anywhere from fifty to several hundred. On a World Ship, there are several thousand. Most take care of the crèche, grutchin, dovin basal, and the maintenance of other vital systems."
"What about low ranking warriors?"

"Probably around the same. Most stay on board and handle the ship's weapons and yammosk. Only the higher ranking warriors have the honor of engaging the enemy in yorik-et."
"And if the commanders and priests no longer have control of these warriors and Shamed Ones?" Anakin said, gazing at the ship's commander with cool blue eyes.
Understanding what he was getting at, Zekk let out a low whistle. "They'd be in very big trouble. Without people to control the vital systems and weapons of their larger ships, they won't be able to maintain their fighting effectiveness."
Anakin nodded. "It's like a story mom told me once. Even if we never see them, the garbage collectors, cleaners and sewer workers are what make our cities work. We might be able to function a few days without them, but eventually we'd be spending all our time trying to keep the place clean and nothing will get done."
The ship let out a warbling beep, and Tahiri moved towards the front of the bridge. "We're emerging from hyperspace."
The ship emerged from the glowing blue corridor and into the debris-filled orbit of Coruscant. Or what was left of it. Vongforming had already begun. Most of the planet was dark, as the light from its tiny sun was no longer being enhanced by the mirror stations. Various organic vessels moved about, making their own modifications to the future Yuuzhan Vong homeworld. In the distance, a fleet of war vessels held their position, with a Worldship standing out directly in the middle.
"That's going to complicate our escape if things go bad," Zekk said.
"Then let's hope things don't 'go bad,'" Alema quipped, her eyes alight at the sight of so many Vong ships.
Anakin was wary of the enthusiasm she was exuding. "Yes, let's. We're only here to rescue my brother."
"Of course."
"We're being hailed by a security ship," Tahiri called out, ending the banter. "How should we respond?"
"We're transporting slaves from Hapes to the surface," Anakin invented
Tahiri and the pilot relayed the message and were in communication with the other ship for another couple of seconds. "We have clearance to land, but have been warned that a Jedi has escaped captivity and has already destroyed a vessel full of slaves."
"Okay, then—"
"Wait, they said Jacen destroyed a ship full of slaves?" Jaina cut in.
Tahiri worried her lower lip. "They didn't mention him by name, but it sounds like it."

"Why would he do that?" Zekk frowned.
"We can ask him when we find him. Did the warning say where Jacen was?" Jaina said anxiously. Not being able to feel her twin, despite being in orbit above the planet he was on, was unnerving her.
Tahiri checked the villip, then nodded. "According to this, his escape pod crashed near the remains of the old Jedi Temple."
Eyebrows rose, and even Tenel Ka appeared surprised. "The old Jedi Temple?"
"This sounds like fun already," Zekk muttered, shaking his head.
"Hang on, our pilot is taking us in," Tahiri motioned to the pilot and gripped the back of his seat.
The others quickly found similar holds as the ship weaved through the debris field surrounding the planet and headed towards the surface. Various instruments whirred or gurgled while the shattered remains of the cityscape rushed by them. Up close, the young Jedi could actually see the foreign plant and animal life steadily claiming the ruined duracrete structures.
"I wonder how many people are still down there," Alema whispered, eyes wide at the devastation.
"They'll find some way to survive," Tenel Ka replied, her voice uncharacteristically soft. "Life always does."
"If you concentrate, you can feel their fear, their pain," Zekk said distantly, his lips barely moving. "The entire planet is being changed, and them with it."
Anakin scanned the planet as they passed over it, feeling everything, the grief, the fear, and…something else. His eyes flew open as something seemed to drag him down to the surface of the planet. Images flashed through his mind rapidly. A powerful force, full of rage and hatred. Grief and pain beyond anything Anakin had experienced before caused Anakin to physically fall to his knees as his breaths came in sharp gasps.
"Anakin!"
He barely heard the others cry out, so strong was the pain. Through it all, he heard a message, a message that froze his mind into a near catatonic state. He had caused the deaths of so many. Had failed those he tried to protect. He deserved to die. He was so powerful, yet if he could not protect them all, he had no right to live. Still gasping, he reached a shaking hand for his lightsaber and…
Get out of his head!
Shortly after the voice rattled his mind, an alien warmth filled him. He almost recognized it, but it was different. It was Tahiri, and it wasn't. The pain that he was feeling was still flowing into him, but was then

leaving his body and going into another. Traveling along his Force-bond to her. It was as if she was syphoning off the intense emotional bombardment into herself.
"Tahiri," he gasped, weakly reaching to her.
"Pain is my specialty." Tahiri's voice was low and weird, just like the time on Yavin IV. "Most people will drown in it, like you. You are not nearly strong enough. But I, I bask in it!"
A massive backlash of Force energy suddenly erupted from both Tahiri and Anakin. Tahiri was sent flying against the far wall, while Anakin tumbled across the bridge's deck, barely aware of what was happening. The backlash also seemed to affect the ship itself, which promptly whined and pitched forward, jerking violently. One of the wings of the vessel clipped a nearby building, sending the ship into an uncontrollable spin. More fragile buildings were ripped apart and pieces of yorik coral flew off with every impact. A gash opened in the bridge and most of the Yuuzhan Vong crew was sucked out. A jagged piece of debris pierced the viewing area and impaled the pilot.
Then, in what was obviously a Force-assisted attack, a lance-shaped piece of duracrete flew up from below and ripped the ship in two. The aft of the ship fell away, crashing through the lower parts of the city as it did. The bridge portion, bucked violently and slammed into another apartment complex. It skidded for a few more meters, dropped off another ledge, then finally came to a stop in the lower reaches of the city. The thunderous landing echoed for several long minutes throughout the empty streets of the planet, before fading away into a deathly silence.
Jaina awoke to the sound of a garbled, electronic voice, and groaned when she tried to move. The events that had just occurred played back through her mind and, ignoring her pain, she abruptly jerked herself into a seated position. Panic filled her and she almost desperately reached out for her younger brother. Feeling both him, and then Tahiri, the older Solo let out a relieved sigh and collapsed back onto the slab of duracrete she had been lying on. She could feel the others as well, shaken but still alive. With her primary concern aside, she evaluated her situation. The voice that had woken her appeared to be an automated message, its systems damaged in the crash.
"….your….Bluenek authorization…ten seconds…comply…your… Bluenek authorization…"
She was in a scientific room of some sorts, though most of it was completely destroyed by the crash. What was left was an empty medical pod of some sort and a variety of medical instruments scattered across the floor. Using the Force to temporarily purge her

body of its aches and pains, Jaina once again pushed off the slab of duracrete and staggered to her feet. Her tendons made rather loud popping noises as she did, and she winced. She was definitely going to be feeling that crash for a while. Reaching out, she located the others. She had been thrown from the front half of the ship, as had both Zekk and Tenel Ka. Alema, Tahiri, and Anakin, however, were still inside. All were stirring, however, a very good sign. Jaina made her way into the remains of the ship and saw that the Vong who hadn't been tossed from the ship also survived. A quick examination revealed that one of them was a Shamed One, but that the other two weren't among the group that had volunteered to help. The warriors were still bound, but badly wounded from impact. The Shamed One was likewise wounded, missing an entire arm.
"Anyone get the number of the speeder that hit me?" Alema muttered, staring at the slanted ceiling as she gathered herself.
"Afraid not. It wiped out all of us," Jaina remarked, offering the Twi'lek a hand.
"And our favorite young couple?" Alema glanced towards where both Anakin and Tahiri had fallen.
"About as bruised and battered as us."
"Not what I meant. What do you think happened?"
"There's a dark Jedi on this planet," Anakin replied in turn, his eyes still closed. "Very powerful, but there's something off about him."
"The last time we met dark Jedi, they stole our escape ship," Alema scowled. "Please tell me we won't be making peace with this one too?"
"Even if we wanted to, I don't think he's capable of understanding that concept."
"Good," Alema checked her lightsaber.
"If you meet him, be careful," Tahiri warned, her voice back to normal as she got to her feet. "Anakin's right. There is something really strange about this one."
"He can still die, can't he?" Alema bared her teeth.
Tahiri rolled her eyes. "Don't say I didn't warn you."
"We should get going," Anakin said suddenly. "There are several Yuuzhan Vong patrols coming this way."
"Probably to investigate the crash," Jaina said, helping her brother to his feet.
"What about them?" Tahiri motioned to the wounded Yuuzhan Vong.
"Leave them," Alema voiced. "The patrols can take care of them."
"They might warn them about us," Jaina disagreed.
"Fine," Alema activated her saber and promptly killed the two warriors. "Problem solved."

The Shamed One, who had also regained consciousness, stared at Alema with naked fear. His eyes darted to the others, and upon seeing the scars on Tahiri's forehead, began to babble in Vongese.
"A prayer to Yun-Shuno," Tahiri said softly in recognition. She shook herself and immediately placed a restraining hand on Alema's arm. "Spare him. He won't tell the others anything."
Jaina looked to Tahiri. "Are you sure?"
"Positive. Not every Yuuzhan Vong is the same, you know."
"Do as she says, Alema," Jaina ordered.
Alema ignored her, still holding her glowing blade and breathing heavily, never once glancing away from the Shamed One. Calmly, she queried the other Solo in the room. "Anakin?'
"It's okay." Anakin acknowledged, though he wondered why Alema was deferring to him. "If Tahiri says he won't tell, he won't."
Alema nodded once and deactivated her blade. "Fine."
Tahiri rattled off another string of Vong at the Shamed One, who hastily agreed.
"What did you tell him?"
"I told him to blame the deaths of those two on the escaped Jedi," Tahiri explained. "It would be hard to hide the lightsaber burns otherwise."
"Good idea," Jaina said. "Come on, we should get moving."
"Guys!" Zekk called out. "You might want to take a look at this."
They hurried out to join both Zekk and Tenel Ka. "What is it?"
"I was looking over what was left of this computer, and I found something…disturbing." Zekk held up a datapad. "Our dark Jedi, is Lord Nyax. A genetically engineered experiment from the days of the Empire."
"You're kidding," Alema blinked.
"I can have Tenel Ka tell you if you don't believe me. She never jokes about something like this."
Jaina took the datapad Zekk was holding and looked over the information. "Elbow and knee-joint blades, height enhancements, a lobotomy, this guy was being bred to be the ultimate soldier."
"Only, the Vong invasion popped his med-pod early," Zekk said.
"That explains what I felt," Anakin spoke. "It was pure instinct, desire and hatred mixed together. Lord Nyax's mind is simply that of a predator with nothing else governing it."
"Another reason we have to stop it," Alema said. "If that thing starts preying on the survivors, they won't even have a chance."
"Take the datapad with us, maybe it can help later," Anakin motioned. "For now, we have to go."

"Go where? It's not like we know where Jacen is at this moment, even I can't feel him."
"We head for the Jedi Temple," Alema said. "Right, Anakin?"
"Right. Jacen's pod crashed in that area, and I can also feel this Lord Nyax heading in that direction too."
"You can feel him that strongly?"
Anakin grimaced. "I think he's actually still in my head somewhere. But it's not like we have the time for me to go into a trance and chase him out."
"Don't worry, Zekk. I won't let him do anything to Anakin," Tahiri's voice darkening once more. Tahiri seemed to shake herself only a second later, a hand reaching up to her scars in confusion.
"Alright then, we should get moving," Jaina said, accepting Tahiri's reassurance.
The group hastily dropped down into the labyrinth of passages that made up the undercity, relying on the Force to guide them. As they walked, Tahiri took one of Anakin's hands in her one of own, lightly resting her head on his shoulder. Their proximity to each other only enhanced the strength of their bond.
"Anakin," Tahiri whispered.
"What's wrong?"
"Something's wrong with me, I can feel it."
Anakin squeezed her hand. "Like there's another part of you just out of your reach?"
"What!" Tahiri looked up, startled. "How did you know?"
"Ever since Hapes, when they used those drugs to keep you under, it's been happening more and more frequently. It's almost like…"
"Almost like what?"
"Like you're becoming a Vong."
Tahiri jerked in surprise, pulling her hand from his. "I'm not! I'm Tahiri, your best friend. I already promised you, didn't I? I'd never become one of them! I'd never hurt you!"
"I know *you* wouldn't. But there's another part of you running around in your head. I think I even saw her once back on Hapes."
"What…what do you mean?"
This time Anakin could feel her fear, and he reached out through the Force to reassure her. "Tahiri, back on Hapes, I couldn't feel you through our normal connection. I had to switch to Vongsense, even though you were standing right in front of me. When I did… I saw someone different. Almost like in the vision I told you. She was you, but she was also scarred and spoke like a Yuuzhan Vong."

The words hit Tahiri like a solid blow, and she stopped in her tracks, her eyes wide. "Anakin I…"
Anakin immediately looked to his side in alarm as Tahiri's Force-presence flashed out of existence. Icy, teal eyes were turned towards him, her body stiff. Anakin concentrated on his lightsaber's lambent, and there she was again, glowing loud and clear.
"Do I scare you, Anakin, my friend?" Tahiri said out loud, her voice slightly off.
Anakin held her gaze, searching her face. "No, but you're scaring Tahiri."
Tahiri's lips twisted into a smile. "I *am* Tahiri."
"No," Anakin reached up and cupped her face. "You aren't. You are what the shapers put in her head. What is your name?"
"You do not recognize me? I am Tahiri."
Anakin closed his eyes and let the memories of his best friend pour into the not-Tahiri in front of him. "That is who Tahiri is. What is your name?"
Tahiri's eyes flashed and she yanked her hand free, moving so that she was in front of Anakin. *"Nikk pryozz Riina Kwaad,* of the noblest of all Shaper domains."
"Riina?"
Anakin fought to hide the turmoil broiling within him. But it was hard to maintain his calm at the various emotions and memories now fluttering through his bond with Tahiri, from her end. He saw memories of Riina growing up in a crèche, making friends, being acknowledged as a shaper. The language of the Yuuzhan Vong, sights, smells. Confusion at being in a human body, at the other set of memories she had.
"That is who I am, Anakin Solo." Riina said softly, taking a step forward as she drew him further into her memories. "Can you accept that?"
A beam of silver light abruptly speared out into the empty space separating them, and a forceful mental tug brought the two of them back to the surrounding world. Alema, holding her blade steady and orientating it towards the smaller blond teen, very coolly interjected herself between Tahiri and Anakin.
"You might want to let Tahiri come back now," Alema said evenly. "Bad things will happen if you don't."
"Alema, wait," Anakin held out a hand.
But Alema didn't move. "She promised to never hurt you. I'm making sure she keeps that promise."
"Alema?" Tahiri blinked.

Alema cocked her head, then feeling the teen through the Force again, deactivated her saber and grinned. "Stang, you came back. I was going to have Anakin all to myself."
Tahiri glared at the Twi'lek and promptly stepped between her and Anakin. "He's taken."
"Remember that the next time you go all Vong." Alema's tone was light, but there was a hint of steel in her voice.
"Are you sure you're all right, Tahiri?" Jaina asked worriedly.
Tahiri settled back against Anakin as he wrapped his arms around her. "I'll be fine. Both you and Anakin will make sure of it."
"Sorry for the delay," Anakin said. "We should be able to…oh bantha poodo."
"Anakin?"
Anakin motioned to the upper levels of the sewer. "Thirty Yuuzhan Vong, if not more. We're surrounded"
The said warriors instantly appeared from every opening, swarming towards the Jedi. Blorash jelly rained down on them, pinning the Jedi in place as the warriors surrounded them.
Zekk, with his hands glued to his sides, groaned. "Ideas?"
"Just one," Anakin said, his gaze still affixed to the top of the sewer system.
"And that is?"
"Hope that Lord Nyax decides to take out the Vong before he takes us out."
"Lord…"
The giant form of Lord Nyax dropped several stories and right into the thickest potion of warriors. Lightsaber blades activated, and a third of the Yuuzhan Vong were killed before they even realized what had happened. The remaining warriors were hopelessly outmatched as the walking killing machine cleaved his way through their lines. In record time, all the warriors lay dead, leaving only Lord Nyax and the team of young Jedi.
"Ideas?" Anakin echoed Zekk as Lord Nyax focused on their immobilized forms.
"Can I take back what I said about making friends with dark Jedi?" Alema asked.
"I think it's too late for that." Jaina struggled to free her lightsaber.
Lord Nyax bypassed Tenel Ka, Zekk, Jaina, and even Anakin, coming to a stop in front of Tahiri. From his reaction, it was obvious he recognized her Force-presence. The one who had absorbed the pain he had given her. The one who intrigued him. Curious, he approached her, bombarding her in an attack of raw pain and agony, darkness and

despair. Tahiri met his glare, resisting the fierce mental attack even though tears began to stream from her eyes.
"I told you before, didn't I? That won't work on me. Pain only makes me stronger."
His child-like face twisted into an enraged snarl, and he swung a lightsaber down on the defenseless teen.
I*Chapter End*I
A/N: Lord Nyax and a cliff hanger! What more could you want?
8-7-12: minor edits to clean up the story (I still have no beta so everything's self-edited!)

ADA 7

Seven
I**I
Tahiri lashed out with the emotions she had been bombarded with, a psychic whip that slammed into Lord Nyax's mind and sent him reeling. It was not the pain that caused him to stagger backwards. Lord Nyax's surprise was clear through the Force as he snarled at the petite Jedi in front of him. That someone would have the audacity to use his own powers against him fueled his mindless rage. But before Lord Nyax could resume his attack, a barefooted Tenel Ka leaped towards him with her blade swinging. Her boots still embedded in the jelly, Tenel Ka advanced on the insane Dark Jedi, driving him away from her friends. Jaina cut herself free and soon joined the red-haired warrior, forcing Lord Nyax even further back. In the meantime, Tahiri levitated a pouch carried by one of the fallen Yuuzhan Vong and began to sprinkle its contents around herself. The blorash jelly retreated from her body to the lure, and Tahiri set about emptying the rest of the contents around Anakin. Zekk, following Tahiri's example, levitated a similar pouch from another body, while Alema used her lightsaber to free herself.
The four joined Tenel Ka and Jaina, cautiously spreading out to surround their towering opponent. Lord Nyax watched them with glittering eyes, his lips pulled back and he bared his teeth. As the Jedi advanced, Lord Nyax deactivated the two lightsabers he was holding and clasped his hands together in concentration.
A crippling miasma of negative emotions leeched out from him, oily tentacles seeping into the minds of the young Jedi and through their defenses. Terror, rage, the darkest of emotions once more surged through the six, and this time even Tahiri dropped to her knees and gripped her head.

Lord Nyax looked to the only non-human within the group, sensing the hidden darkness residing in her core. With a feral grin, he held out one hand in her direction and imposed his will on her conflicted mind.
Kill Tahiri. Kill Tahiri. Kill Tahiri.
Alema's entire body shuddered as she looked in the direction of the younger teen. Tahiri was still on her knees, gasping for air as sweat poured down her face. The blond teen was gripping her head, her green eyes wide and unseeing. Though Alema's first instinct was to help her, another feeling rose up from within. She did not know why, but as she stared at Tahiri, she focused on the three scars on the teen's forehead. A feeling of rage turned her vision red. Tahiri was part Vong, Vong killed Numa, Tahiri should die.
On unsteady feet, Alema activated her lightsaber and staggered, step by step, towards Tahiri. In the background, Lord Nyax looked on with a satisfied grin. No one could defy him, he was all powerful. The silver blade hissed as Alema swayed back and forth with every step, shadows cast by its brilliant light shifting with every move.
Before Alema reached her target, however, Tahiri went completely limp, her hands falling to her sides. Both Alema and Lord Nyax froze, uncertain of what had just occurred. Lord Nyax was completely nonplussed as the smallest Jedi suddenly disappeared from his senses entirely. Suddenly, Tahiri's eyes snapped open, and her blade activated.
"*Do-ro'ik vong pratte!"*
Tahiri thrust out a hand, and Alema was sent flying through the air. The blond teen then sprung towards Lord Nyax, her blue saber blurring. Lord Nyax found it hard to keep up with the blond's erratic combat style. Further adding to his aggravation was that, even if he could see her, he could no longer feel her through the Force. With a frustrated snarl, he pushed against his smaller attacker and used the brief window to dart towards the other Jedi. He could still feel the others, and they would die. His first target was the Force-powerful young male, nearly unconscious from his mental assault.
But as he charged towards him, a spike of rage exploded from behind him, and the blond Jedi reappeared in the Force. Lord Nyax glanced over his shoulder just in time to have his head slammed into one of his knee blades. The safety mechanism deactivated the blade, but Lord Nyax was still sent stumbling backwards. He recovered and saw that the blond Jedi had stationed herself protectively in front of his intended target, green eyes nearly black. With another howl, Lord Nyax reached out to the mind of another Jedi. He would destroy this annoyance if it was the last thing he did.

Jaina was in a dark fog; the fears, created by the dangers her brothers were in, magnified several fold. She wasn't strong enough to protect them. She was failing them. Losing them to the turmoil of the war. No matter how hard she tried, it wasn't enough. Would never be enough. Slowly, the war was pulling them away. Breaking apart her family. And it was all Tahiri's fault.

Despite the anguish she was in, Jaina froze at that last thought. Was that right? Tahiri was part Vong now, and it was the Vong's fault that Anakin and Jacen nearly died.

Panting, Jaina's hands clenched into fists as her head jerked upwards. A new anger began to course through her veins.

Tahiri watched her impassively, while Lord Nyax projected his satisfaction. What they weren't aware of, however, was that Jaina was countering all the negative emotions with memories and feelings of her own. She wanted Anakin and Tahiri to be together. After everything the two had gone through together, it would be unfair if they weren't. Tahiri was as much as victim of this war as anyone else was. She might even be a Solo one day. And that was a day Jaina definitely wanted to celebrate.

Jaina unsteadily returned to her feet, snarling not at Tahiri, but at Lord Nyax. "Nice try, you worthless piece of Sithspawn."

Lord Nyax victorious smiled turned into an angry sneer, which devolved into alarm when lightning erupted from the brown-haired Jedi's fingertips. Unlike before, it was not lightning based off of anger or hate, but borne from the desire to protect. Jaina would be damned if she would let this reject of a Sith Lord hurt those she cared for.

Lord Nyax held out both hands to absorb the oncoming onslaught. Just when he was going to release a devastating attack of his own, Tahiri darted in from behind and cleanly sliced off one of Lord Nyax's hands. The would-be dark Jedi let out a howl, and a blast of Force energy erupted from him, sending both Tahiri and Jaina flying backwards. By the time the two had recovered, Lord Nyax had retreated into one of the sewer's many winding passageways.

The Force-induced terror lifted, and the others collapsed to the ground, their bodies still shaking from the after-effects.

Zekk, who had relived some of the darker moments at his time at the Shadow Academy, stood and glanced towards Jaina, his face haunted. For the first time in a long while, he reached out to her for reassurance, using Jaina's steadfast presence to anchoring himself back in the present.

Jaina, for her part, stiffened upon feeling Zekk's presence. She looked over her shoulder, her surprise clear on her face. As lost as she had

been in the memories of her family's earlier years and the hope for a better future, the bond between her and Zekk brought forth a whole slew of new memories. The adventures they had had together, the good and the bad. She swallowed as feelings she couldn't afford to have came back full force. With great effort, she shut it all out, meeting Zekk's gaze apologetically and then looking away. That was all a different time, a different place, they had been different people. As much as she wanted it all back, it wasn't possible. She felt another gaze on her, and saw Anakin looking at her with raised eyebrows. Flushing, Jaina turned away again, doing her best to reconstitute her emotional shields and mental barriers.
"All in favor of not going after that thing?" Zekk smiled faintly.
"It will only get stronger if we leave it alone," Anakin pointed out.
"We could barely drive it off as it was, Anakin," Jaina said, shaking her head. "We're not equipped to hunt a reject of the Empire, no matter how insane it is. Let's just get Jacen and find a way off this planet."
"I'm with Jaina," Tahiri agreed, leaning heavily on Anakin. The exertion of the previous battle had more or less finished off what stamina she had built up and she was a sickly pale color. "I was the only one who stayed unaffected and I can barely stay awake as it is."
"It isn't our problem at the moment," Tenel Ka spoke up, helping support a still disorientated Alema. "We came here to rescue Jacen. Besides, we are not in the best position to fight anyone at the moment."
Anakin saw Tenel Ka's point and reluctantly agreed. "Okay, then do we keep to the sewers or risk the surface?"
"If these guys," Jaina motioned to the massacred Vong around them. "Were looking for us or Lord Nyax down here, chances are that there will be more."
Zekk nodded. "The last thing we need is to run into Lord Nyax or more Vong. Given our luck, that'll probably happen if we stay down here."
"The surface is probably just as dangerous. I doubt slaves can freely walk the surface without some supervision," Tahiri mentioned, sagging against Anakin after her comment.
"If we're on the surface, we might be able to find out more about the state of Coruscant," Tenel Ka said. "When we get back, the military might find the information useful."
"Then to the surface we go," Anakin said faintly, his own fatigue catching up to him.
Zekk and Jaina exchanged an exasperated glance. Without saying anything the two stepped over to Anakin and Tahiri. Jaina detached

Tahiri from Anakin's side and absorbed the younger woman's weight, while Zekk slung one of Anakin's arms over his shoulders.
"The last thing we need is for you two to pass out on us, Little Brother," Zekk said lightly. "Remember, you're the only one who can sense Vong, and Tahiri's the only one of us who can speak it."
"I didn't come here to swap brothers again." Jaina gently bolstered Tahiri's strength with her own. "And I sure as…" She trailed off as Tahiri went limp and seemed to vanish in the Force. "Tahiri!"
To everyone's alarm, a bubble of Force energy surrounded both women, and Jaina and Tahiri collapsed to the ground.
|* *|
Tahiri immediately knew that she was not on Coruscant anymore when she saw the vivid, red sun burning away in the sky. She was in a field of black grass that was swaying in an invisible breeze. Twisted coral-grown structures towered off in the distance. A vague, shadowy figure was standing in front of her, making sounds Tahiri couldn't understand. Instinctively, Tahiri reached out for Anakin, her breathing coming a little harder when she realized that she couldn't feel him or any of the others.
"You don't need them."
Tahiri whirled around in alarm, her lightsaber activating in a heartbeat. When she saw the speaker, however, her mouth went dry and her legs shook. She was looking at herself, but all scarred up and dressed in Yuuzhan Vong armor. Just like Anakin's dream.
"You? Anakin killed you!"
"He thought he did," Riina said darkly. "And I've forgiven him. Or have you forgotten, these last few times it was *me* who saved him, not you. You were too weak." She spat the last words out as if it had left a foul taste in her mouth.
Tahiri's grip on her saber slackened. The shadow creature continued to watch, still spewing its feral sounding words. Shaking her head, Tahiri held up her blade once more. "Why?"
"Why what?"
"Why would you save him?"
"Because you wanted me too," Riina answered with a shrug. "Why else would you let me take control of your body? You weren't strong enough, you never were. Not on Yavin, not on Myrkr, not even on Hapes or Coruscant. You weren't strong enough and you know it. You shrink away from pain like a crècheling, hide behind the others whenever things become too much. You, the poor little orphaned Tahiri."

"I'm sorry I'm not stupid enough to scar myself up," Tahiri retorted. "Have you looked in a mirror lately?"
Riina scoffed. "So you think you're strong, do you? Why don't you destroy that shadow creature watching us? It'll be dangerous if you let it grow."
Tahiri looked to the blurry figure uncertainly. "What is it?"
"Does it matter? This is our mind. It doesn't belong here." An amphistaff materialized in Riina's hand, and she whirled it experimentally. "If you prefer it, *I* can take of it as well. Just like all the other times, I'm sure Anakin will appreciate it."
"No." Tahiri blurted, unwilling to lose Anakin to this alternate version of her. "No, I can do it."
"Really? I doubt it. You couldn't even endure Lord Nyax's mental attack without turning to me. For all we know, that could be a remnant of him."
Tahiri's blue blade hummed as the blond Jedi turned it towards the shadow creature.
"Go on," Riina encouraged, her amphistaff dissolving. "Prove to me that you have the strength. That you don't need me to protect Anakin all by yourself."
Tahiri reached out with the Force in an attempt to ascertain what the creature was, but something was blocking her, preventing her from even detecting the creature. "What are you?" Tahiri took a step forward. The creature snarled at her, raising its arms.
"Look out!" Riina hissed. "It's going to attack you!"
At Riina's words, Tahiri reflexively thrust her lightsaber forward, impaling the creature straight through its chest. It was only then that the shadows that concealed the creature fell away. Tahiri let out a cry and dropped her lightsaber as she looked on Jaina's stunned visage in panic.
"Jaina! No!"
"Oh? It was her all along?" Riina said contritely, smiling nonetheless.
Tahiri held Jaina's limp form, the woman seemingly vanishing in her grasp. "What did I do!"
"Stabbed our beloved's sister, it looks like."
Tahiri looked sharply up at her counterpart, rage flooding her features. In a split second, her lightsaber flew back into her hands and she lunged at Riina.
"Face it," Riina crowed as she blocked strike after strike. "You aren't suited to be Anakin's! Even now you try to blame me for your actions. As long as you exist, you are a danger to him." Riina took a massive leap backwards, exponentially increasing the distance between them.

"You're the dangerous one!" Tahiri yelled back, tears streaming down her face. She sprinted after Riina through the tall, black grass. "You're an idiot if you think I'll let you go! Jaina may be dead, but you'll join her!"
"You did kill her didn't you," Riina replied jovially, leaping backwards again, nearing the coral structures that seemed to ring the field, as Tahiri's scream of rage filled the air.
"Stay still!"
"What's wrong, little Tahiri?" Riina taunted, materializing her amphistaff once more. "Do you have some misplaced belief that you can kill me? Your pain is absolutely delicious by the way."
Tahiri launched herself at Riina again, snarling. Amphistaff met lightsaber, and Tahiri whirled around and her blade delivered a stinging blow to Riina's arm. Simultaneously, Tahiri's eyes widened and she staggered as a matching cut appeared on her own arm.
"What?"
"Silly girl," Riina chided, her amphistaff replaced by a coufee. "You haven't realized it by now? I *am* you. Despite my name and my appearances, your pain is my own, so are your happiness's and fears. You simply can't defeat me without killing yourself." As if to emphasize her point, Riina drew her coufee against one of the scars on her forehead. Tahiri yelped, a hand flying upwards to her own and coming away red. "That was for thinking you could beat me."
"I'm not you!" Tahiri said almost desperately, recalling Anakin's vision once more.
Riina shook her head and drew the coufee against the second scar. Blood began to trickle down Tahiri's forehead. "If I am not you, then why do you bleed as I do?"
Tahiri did her best to deny the truth of the situation, but when Riina drew the blade across the third and final scar, the strength left her and she dropped her lightsaber. "How…how is this possible?"
Riina grimaced. "If you want to believe it, a whole lot of luck. If it wasn't for those drugs they gave you on Hapes, I might never have been able to climb my way out of the darkness. But climb I did. I went from being a voiceless, body-less entity to what you see now. The drugs, they suppressed your conscious-self long enough for me to build a solid foothold in your world, and Lord Nyax's pain blasts were like rain to a parched *galtak* in a desert. You might have been able to defeat me when I was stuck in the darkness, but now, now you have no chance."
Tahiri glared at her doppelganger. "I will die before unleashing you upon my world."

"And what will that do to Anakin? He's already lost his sister; do you want him to lose us as well?"
"What choice do I have?"
"Merge with me," Riina answered, discarding her weapon and extending a bloodied hand. "Together, we are human, Jedi, Yuuzhan Vong, and shaper. Separate, we are mere shadows of who we could be. Join me, and together we shall combine our strengths and keep Anakin alive. He will destroy me without you, but you will lose him without me."
Tahiri stared at the outstretched hand, her mouth dry. Riina stood still, like a statue, the massive columns of coral rising up behind her like the bars of a prison.
"Well?" Riina said softly. "What will you do, Tahiri Veila, daughter of the desert planet, beloved of Anakin Solo?"
|* *|
"This isn't looking good," Zekk murmured, glancing briefly over his shoulder at Jaina. He was currently carrying the young woman in question, while Alema did the same for Tahiri. After Jaina and Tahiri fell unconscious, the remaining members of the group decided that staying in the sewers was unwise. Separating Jaina and Tahiri, however, had nearly killed the both of them, so Alema now walked alongside Zekk, while Tenel Ka supported an exhausted Anakin. "Her heart rate is slowing even more."
"Whatever happened is killing her," Alema agreed, sweat dripping down her face as she and the rest of the group pulled their strength to sustain the two unconscious Jedi.
"It's worse than that," Zekk replied grimly. "After she let out that scream a while back, her mind went completely blank. I reach out to her and she doesn't even recognize me."
"Jacen might be able to help her," Anakin said faintly. "He's always been good with living creatures and he has that added bonus of being her twin."
"Are you sure we shouldn't stop and rest, my friend?" Tenel Ka asked softly, noting that Anakin's skin was clammy and pale.
Anakin emitted a weak chuckle. "I'm only exhausted. My sister's near death and Tahiri's moving in and out of the Force. No, when we get Jacen back I'll take a break. We can't afford to take a break now."
Zekk groaned. "Just so you know, Anakin, I am *not* appreciating the similarities between now and Myrkr."
"Don't worry," Anakin flashed a muted version of his trademark grin. "I promised Tahiri no heroics."

"And what do you call going on like you are in your condition?" Alema pointed out.
"Stupidity," Zekk answered before Anakin. "Stupidity with a dose of stubbornness. It runs in the Solo family."
"Genetic defect?" Alema said, shooting a mocking glare at Anakin.
"Has to be," Zekk agreed. "Who else do you know would voluntarily go on back-to-back suicide missions to planets at the heart of the enemy lines?"
Alema pretended to think. "Well, there's Jaina. Their dad might too. The gene must have skipped Jacen; he's too levelheaded to be related."
"Jacen is definitely related to them. Who else would voluntarily surrender to the Yuuzhan Vong after completing the mission, and then cut off his connections with anyone who might be able to support him?" Tenel Ka deadpanned, stunning everyone.
"Seriously though, Anakin," Zekk said, his eyes dark with worry. "There's no sense rescuing your sister if you end up dead. She nearly went dark worrying over you, Jacen, and Tahiri. What do you think you dying will do to her?"
"I'm not going to die," Anakin said reassuringly. He then chose that moment to break into a coughing fit. "Yet, anyways. I'm just a little out of shape."
The group of young Jedi exited a side alley, and then froze at the sight before them. Stretching out all down the length of the pathway in front of them was a field of glowing Vong plants. The emergence of the Jedi did not go unnoticed. Several dozen Shamed Ones tending the field were staring at them with wide eyes. One immediately turned to another and barked a series of orders.
"Good or bad?" Zekk said nervously.
"Jeedai!" A collective alarm rang out all across the field.
"Bad," Alema answered hastily. "Let's move!"
A low-flying transport of some sort flew overhead, casting a momentary shadow before warriors began to fast-rope down from it on vine-like tendrils. The Jedi took off running, the field flashing by them as more cries rang out. A thud bug whistled by them and ricocheted off a ruined speeder.
"I thought the scarless ones were our friends!" Alema yelled.
"Only some of them are," Anakin said. "Besides, with all the warriors pouring in from everywhere, they were probably under observation."
A thud bug winged Tenel Ka, dropping both her and Anakin to the ground.
"Go!" Anakin yelled to the others. "Get to the Jedi Temple. We'll join you there!"

Alema, however, double-backed, forcing Zekk to follow her. Stopping in front of Anakin and a still recovering Tenel Ka, she un-shouldered Tahiri's unconscious form. "You guys go, I'll hold them off."
"Alema!"
"*You* promised Vong Girl no heroics. That promise doesn't apply to me," Alema said, helping both Anakin and Tenel Ka to their feet, shifting so that Tahiri was supported between the two of them, and giving them a small shove. "Now go, I'll catch up."
"Alema."
"Go!"
Anakin tore his gaze away, cursing under his breath as he and Tenel Ka began to run, with Zekk close beside them. The snap-hiss of a lightsaber, and a mocking laugh, was the last sound they heard as they retreated away from the field.
|* *|
Dasok Vek was the Yuuzhan Vong equivalent of a lieutenant, responsible for the security of the lambent fields. Dreaming of a far better post, he had already been on the lookout for the *Jeedai* who had destroyed the slaving vessel in orbit when the new alert had been sounded. From the babbled explanations given by the Shamed Ones there was not only one *Jeedai,* but an entire group of them. The gods had blessed him indeed.
As he led his fifteen-strong unit through the lambent thickets, thoughts of glory and honor flood his mind. He could already see his invitation to kneel before the Supreme Overlord himself, presenting his supreme one with the heads of the *Jeedai* that he, Dasok Vek, had personally slain.
So distracted was he in his thoughts, that he didn't realize that the man he had left as his rearguard, had disappeared.
Stealthily, they moved through the field.
Another warrior, this time on the wing of their formation, fell as if tripped. But he didn't get up. Not that Dasok noticed.
"Keep your eyes peeled." Dasok hissed. "The reports say that the *Jeedai* were wounded. They could not have gotten far."
Even as he spoke, another warrior at the back of their formation jerked as a silver blade shot out of his head. The warrior next to him opened his mouth to sound a warning, but promptly had his head detached from his shoulders by the same blade.
"Remember, if we capture these Jedi, we will no doubt be allowed onto the frontlines and share in the glory of battle," Dasok continued, oblivious to the fact that his unit was now four less than what he had

started out with. "Your success will be my success, and my own will be yours."
As the group emerged from the lambent fields, out onto the ruined streets of the infidel's capital planet, Dasok scanned the area with keen eyes. A trail through a gathering of moss on one side-street caught his attention. The *Jeedai* were making this too easy.
"Aklvah, Tsivali, you will circle around and entrap the *Jeedai* on the other side. Everyone else, with me."
As Dasok eagerly crept towards the narrow street, the two warriors he had ordered broke away from the group.
That was the last anyone saw of them. While in the process of circling around to the other side of the street, a shadow dropped down from above and decapitated the both of them.
Dasok emerged from the narrow street, frowning when he saw neither his men nor his prey.
It was then he finally noticed how small his team had become. His eyes widened in horror and humiliation. Had the *Jeedai* been stalking him when, all this time, he had fashioned himself the predator? With a hiss, he gripped his amphistaff and looked around wildly. There was no sign of anyone.
"Back to the lambent fields," Dasok swallowed; the sinking feeling unbecoming of a warrior of his status burned in his stomach. "We will not allow the *Jeedai* to draw us into such an obvious trap."
His men provided no argument as they retreated back into the relative safety of the field. More warriors from other commanders joined up, and two Yorik-et flew by overhead. Seeing his commanding officer, Dasok stood at attention.
"Commander!"
"Dasok," the scarred warrior sneered. "What is this nonsense about seeing a group of *Jeedai*? There is only the one from the slave ship."
"It is not nonsense, sir. The Shamed Ones reported seeing six *Jeedai* at the edge of the field. Two appeared to have been injured."
"Is that so?" The commander said, his eyes flickering past the gathered Shamed Ones as if they weren't even worthy of his attention. "Dasok. How likely is it for one, much less six,*Jeedai* to bypass our Supreme Commander's fleet in orbit, without anyone knowing about it?"
Dasok's eyes bulged. He knew he was on shaky ground. He could either stick to his story and thus accuse the Supreme Overlord's fleet, and by extension accuse the Supreme Overlord himself, of incompetence, or deny it altogether and let the *Jeedai* he knew existed, get away. He quickly regained control of his emotions and pulled out his amphistaff. Without another word, he spun around and

brought it down on the head of the nearest Shamed One. The scarless Yuuzhan Vong crumpled without a sound.
"My apologies, commander, for creating such a commotion. I will have the liars punished most severely."
"See that you do," the commander said darkly. "The Supreme Overlord is the avatar of the gods and I will not take kindly to anyone who questions his abilities or knowledge. The only *Jeedai* on the loose is the Jacen Solo, Nom Anor and Vergere's pet project. It is more likely that the Shamed Ones saw some of the survivors of our invasion and called them *Jeedai* just to get attention. Deal with it or I will ensure that you are posted to the bio-matter recycling plant for the rest of your life."
"Yes, commander. Sorry, commander." Dasok didn't meet the warrior's eyes. There was no point in mentioning the loss of his people; it would only open him up to more ridicule. Receiving a dismissive nod, Dasok backed away and did his best to turn invisible.
Once the commander and the remaining warriors had dispersed, Dasok turned to his own people. "Gather all the Shamed Ones who dared lie to us and bring them here. It appears that they need a reminder of their place."
"Sir!" His remaining nine warriors went off to do as they were told.
The moment he was alone, Dasok felt his skin crawl. He whirled around, eyes darting everywhere for a source. He saw it, a lone shadow hiding in the remains of a lobby of a nearby building.
"*Jeedai.*" He seethed. He hadn't been imagining things; the foul creature *had* been stalking him.
The Yuuzhan Vong soldier drew his amphistaff and rushed the building. The shadow fled further into its depths, and he followed. This was now a matter of honor. He would show that commander that there was more than one *Jeedai*. He would clear his name. The shadow darted up a spiraling staircase, its footsteps barely audible as she danced higher and higher.
"Catch me if you can, Vong!" A mocking voice taunted. "Or are you a coward? A nobody? You have to be to be guarding farms while all your friends are off fighting at Hapes."
Dasok had the unfortunate ability to understand the infidel's language, and her words only infuriated him more. Up the two went, until the ground was far below them. Dasok burst into the room on the top floor, panting, expecting to see the *Jeedai* waiting for him.
He found her, a blue-skinned female of the Twi'lek race. Only, he couldn't do a thing. His feet were now encased in blorash jelly, and the *Jeedai* had thrown another blob, binding his arms.
How had the *Jeedai* obtained blorash jelly?

And then it clicked. She must have taken it from his slain warriors, and now here he was, immobilized by his people's own weapon. The *Jeedai* looked on with an excited grin. She reached behind her and pulled out a coufee.
"I've wanted to do this for a long time," the *Jeedai*cooed. "A long, long time."
"Kill me and be done with it!" Dasok snarled.
"Oh? You can speak Basic? Even better." The woman took two steps forward and jammed the coufee into Dasok's shoulder joint. "Listen closely, Vong. You may think that you can get away with hurting people, even hurting your own kind just because they don't have scars, but I draw the line when you start coming after my friends. So, I believe a little lesson is in order. Too bad it's too late for you."
The warrior snarled, spitting at her in anger. "You mean to torture me?"
The smile the woman gave him chilled him to the bone, and Dasok could have sworn that he saw her eyes flash yellow for the slightest of seconds. "Torture you? Oh no. You see Vong. That isn't the Jedi way. What I'm going to do is skin your head with your subordinate's own knife. I'll then plant your head on your own amphistaff right in the middle of the field. You will not die a glorious death that I'm sure all of your kind dream of. Instead, you will die here, alone, and most definitely in agony. We're high enough so your friends won't hear you, and I've sent all of my friends ahead so they won't know about this at all. So, by all means, start screaming like the Vong filth you are."
And scream Dasok did.
|* *|*
Anakin felt a chill go down his spine, and it had nothing to do with how sick he currently felt. Unconsciously, he glanced over his shoulder towards Alema's general direction. He could still feel her, and the impression he got was that she was having fun. It was not the good sort of fun either.
"You're going to have to talk with her when she gets back," Zekk muttered, likewise unnerved.
"Me?"
"She won't listen to anyone else," Zekk answered. "You saw the way she deferred to you earlier."
"And just what am I supposed to say?" Anakin raised an eyebrow. "I'm not all knowing you know."
"I know, but think of something. That anger in her," Zekk adjusted his grip on Jaina. "It'll either destroy her or make her go dark. I know Master Skywalker fears the same thing."

"She won't go dark. At least not all the way," Anakin said with confidence he didn't feel. From the short time he had known Alema, he had found her to be extremely pragmatic. She saw the galaxy different from others. It sometimes disturbed him, but he knew she would always step up if the situation called for it.
"If you say so," Zekk shrugged.
"Over there," Tenel Ka cut in, pointing towards a flickering sign. It was an advertisement for museum tours at the old Jedi Temple and was the only source of light for quite some distance.
"I don't think there are any tour guides left, Tenel Ka," Zekk remarked lightly.
"Behind the sign," Tenel Ka said patiently.
The two male Jedi saw a cargo skiff. There was an empty flatbed section for the cargo, and a single seat for the pilot. It was covered with debris and had a few dings, but was otherwise intact.
"We can use that to carry Tahiri and Jaina," Tenel Ka said unnecessarily.
"If it still works," Anakin added. "We don't have the best of luck at the moment."
"Let's find out," Zekk made his way over to the skiff. He pressed the ignition button, and the skiff hummed to life. "Looks like it works."
"You get on too, Anakin," Tenel Ka calmly ordered.
Anakin blinked and looked to Zekk. The older Jedi was nodding in agreement. "You're not looking too well, Anakin. Get on and conserve your strength."
Wearily, Anakin joined both Tahiri and Jaina on the back of the cargo skiff while Zekk slid into the pilot's seat. Zekk guided the skiff through the debris-strewn streets, while Tenel Ka walked alongside and kept a look out for any danger. They were well aware that people were watching from the shadows. Could feel their apprehension, fear, as well as a primal hunger. At the same time, the Jedi knew that they could do nothing for the survivors of the invasion of Coruscant, and forced themselves to move on.
Several hours of navigating through the darkened side-streets went by before the group could feel Alema's approach. Tenel Ka gave a brief nod to Zekk and he powered down the skiff. Seconds ticked by, then minutes. Finally, the blue-skinned Twi'lek emerged from the shadows, her appearance shocking Tenel Ka and Zekk. Several Vong pendants dangled from her utility belt, along with three coufee and a cloth pouch. Strapped to her back was a razor-bug launcher, complete with at least four twittering, deadly projectiles. She had also smeared a substance, which looked suspiciously like Vong blood, in an intricate

design over her face. In the darkness, her eyes stood out, briefly flecked with yellow.
She blinked, and her eyes were normal once more.
"Alema," Zekk greeted cautiously.
"Zekk," Alema motioned to the back of the skiff. "How are Anakin and the others?"
"Anakin's in a trance, the other two are unchanged. What about you?"
Alema tilted her head. "What about me?"
"You've changed," Tenel Ka observed.
"The horror," Alema said with a sardonic grin, mock grasping her chest. She rolled her eyes and shook her head, plopping the razor-bug launcher onto the back of the skiff. "Don't worry, I won't go dark. I just took the necessary steps to make sure that you, Anakin, and the others are safe."
Zekk narrowed his eyes. "How?"
Alema shrugged. "Killed all the Vong chasing us."
"Their disappearance won't raise any alarm?" Tenel Ka said skeptically.
"Oh, they didn't disappear," Alema replied, absently buffing her nails on her tunic. "Don't worry your heads over them. I took care of them and that's all that matters."
Glancing helplessly at Tenel Ka, Zekk rubbed his forehead and started up the skiff. "Fine, we're nearing the temple anyways. Once we get there, we find Jacen, some way to get off this planet, and hopefully get back to Hapes with all of us in one piece."
Alema smirked, falling in stride opposite of Tenel Ka. "Simple."
I* *I
Tahiri closed her eyes as the imaginary breeze swooshed through the field of black grass. Riina's offer made sense. Alone, she was simply the orphan girl from Tatooine, wanting to belong. She was a Jedi, but she was neither the strongest nor the smartest. She was just a foolish girl who had gotten herself captured by the Vong, nearly got Anakin killed when he tried to rescue her. She wasn't strong enough. By herself, she never would be. How could she ever hope to keep up with Anakin? His power, his fame, his charm.
All of her doubts and insecurities swirled through her mind. It was as though a cloak of darkness was being pulled around her as the world she was in began to fade away.
If she gave herself over to her counterpart she would have the strength she needed. Riina continued to whisper, her voice coming from everywhere and nowhere.
Give in
Give in Tahiri

Duzaak Tahiri
Tahiri fell to her knees, clasping her hands over her ears. "Shut up!" New fears took her and her stomach protested at the mere thought of becoming one with Riina. She could not imagine merging with this creature in front of her. She was Tahiri Veila, of Tatooine and of the Sand People. A Jedi. Anakin's best friend. What would happen to all that, to who she was, if she becomes someone new? What if this was the cause of Anakin's vision. The burn on her hand, the stinging of her forehead, was clear that Riina would never go away as long as she existed. What if, by joining with Riina, she became the one thing he feared? Tahiri whimpered at the thought and Anakin's name involuntarily left her lips.
"Shhh…" Riina whispered, draping a comforting arm around Tahiri's shoulders. "You are thinking too much. We need to merge, merge and become one. We'll become someone new. *You'll* become someone stronger. Someone better suited for Anakin. This for Anakin, nothing else matters."
"I killed his sister," Tahiri repeated dimly.
"The pain will make him stronger."
"He will never forgive me."
"You are blameless, you were weak. When he sees the new us, he will grant us clemency."
Tahiri lifted her head and stared into the striated orbs of her Yuuzhan Vong self. "Why do you care for Anakin?"
"Because you do," Riina answered simply. "I *am* you. Your fears are my own. Your desires, my own. Pain and pleasure, happiness and sorrow, all of what you feel, I do as well. I feel no differently towards him than you do."
Tahiri was silent, and the whispering around her resumed, much stronger than before.
Give in.
Give in!
GIVE IN!
|* *|
The group of young Jedi advanced through the empty streets of Coruscant, the faint hum of the skiff's repuslors a noisy racket in the dead silence around them.
"There it is," Zekk murmured softly. "The old Jedi Temple."
"Jacen is there," Tenel Ka's lips barely moved as she said this. Her eyes were glistening and her single hand clutched in a tight fist over her chest as she realized that she could actually feel the elder Solo brother again. "He's there, in the temple."

"And surprised out of his mind," Anakin added wryly, his eyes still closed as he briefly emerged from his meditation.
Zekk gave Anakin a dry roll of his eyes. "I would be too if I were in his place. Feel any Vong?"
"No."
"No."
When their Twi'lek companion had replied at the exact same time as Anakin, everyone's head snapped back to look at Alema. At their gazes, Alema sighed and reached into the pouch at her side. Eyebrows shot into the air as she pulled out a glowing lambent. "It liked me."
"You have a lambent?" Zekk said incredulously.
"So does Anakin," Alema said defensively.
"That's not what I meant," Zekk shook his head. "I thought you had to bond with those things for them to be of any use."
"We bonded. Or at least I think we did. I've never bonded to a Vong crystal before. I just thought that it'd be useful in detecting Vong."
"Anakin?"
"It wouldn't still be glowing like that if the bond wasn't established."
"We can worry about the particulars later," Tenel Ka said impatiently. "The longer we wait, the worse Jaina becomes. We need to take her to Jacen, now."
"You're right, lets…" Zekk trailed off. The group could feel Jacen, but they could also feel another Force presence headed in his direction.
"Sithspawn! It's Lord Nyax!"
"And he's heading for the temple," Anakin said grimly. "Tenel Ka, Alema, go, we'll catch up."
Tenel Ka didn't need to be told twice and took off in a flash. Alema pocketed her lambent, exchanged a nod with Anakin, then followed in pursuit.
Zekk set the skiff at full power, but it wasn't that fast. It was a cargo skiff, not a podracer. Yet, with both Tahiri and Jaina down, and Anakin barely hanging in there, he didn't really have any choice.
"I hope the two of them can handle Nyax," Zekk muttered.
"Jacen's with them," Anakin said, sounding calmer than his Force presence suggested. "They'll be okay."
|* *|*
Tenel Ka ran faster than she ever ran before. Not even in the forest of Dathomir had she felt such an urgency to run. Her heart beat loudly with every breath she took. Wind whipped her copper braids every which way, the duracrete and plastisteel world flying by her in a blur. She vaulted over a fallen speeder and ran along a crumbling walkway, the temple growing nearer with every step. The walkway abruptly

ended. A massive piece of debris had taken out a large portion of the path ahead of her. Yet, Tenel Ka continued, hurling herself into the air, over the gap, in a record breaking hurdle. She landed on the other side, barely. Her sweat slickened hand scrambled for a purchase on the jagged duracrete. An exposed metal bar scraped her arm, but she ignored it. Hauling herself up, she wasted no time in continuing her sprint. She had come this far, she would *not* let Lord Nyax get to Jacen before her.

She blew through the column-lined double doors of the temple entrance, homing in on Jacen's Force presence. Several holographic presentations hummed to life as Tenel Ka raced past the exhibits. She paid no attention to '*The Rise and Fall of the Jedi Order*' holovid that was being projected on a massive screen on the wall, nor did she care about the model ships dangling from the ceiling. Jacen was close. Lord Nyax was closer.

As she neared a twisting staircase that led to the upper levels, a hulking figure charged out of the shadows. Tenel Ka flipped backwards to avoid a scything attack, her lightsaber flying into her hand. She expertly parried a flurry of seemingly random strikes, before dancing out of the way and out of the range of Lord Nyax's unnaturally long arms.

Lord Nyax drew back thin lips to snarl at her. Tenel Ka responded by hurling the Sith across the room with a powerful Force push. Display cases noisily shattered as he tumbled through them, his flight stopped only by the opposite wall.

Unaffected, the deformed dark Jedi flipped back to his feet, surrounded by the sinister red glow of his six lightsaber blades. Pure malice radiated from his body, and red-veined eyes locked onto Tenel Ka's hardened grey ones.

He held out a hand, and Tenel Ka immediately felt a pressing darkness surround her mind.

She managed to jerk her head away, only to hear him charge at her again. As he neared, instead of attacking her with his lightsabers, Lord Nyax blasted Tenel Ka with a Force push of his own.

The Hapan Princess painfully rebounded off a railing. She was struck with a second Force blast that sent her flying over and into a free fall to a lower level. She landed with a bone breaking thud, the air forced from her lungs upon impact. Dazed, she only just made out Lord Nyax's outline plummeting after her.

Before Lord Nyax landed, Alema arrived. With a lightning fast shoulder tackle from behind, Alema drove the dark Jedi into the wall, then flipped clear of the angry blades that sliced through the air after her.

"Still alive, Tenel Ka?" Alema quipped, silver flashing against a multitude of red.
Lord Nyax attempted to halt Alema's momentum with another blast of Force assisted fear.
The Twi'lek, however, flung her lightsaber into the air, where it cleaved apart several cables that had been suspending an old starfighter. The dart-shaped fighter plummeted and would have crushed Lord Nyax, if the limber Sith hadn't leaped back to the upper levels in safety.
Seemingly learning from Alema's tactics, Lord Nyax proceeded to slice away the supporting cables of several more fighters, and used the Force to hurl all of them down at his enemies. A massive ruckus of twisting and crumpling metal rang out, but neither Jedi's Force presence disappeared. Lord Nyax snarled once more and decided to retreat into the inner sanctum of the temple. He needed more power, and he knew just where to get it.
Below, both Alema and Tenel Ka weakly threw off the remains of the museum pieces, before collapsing in exhaustion.
"Lord Nyax is learning," Tenel Ka muttered, closing her eyes and feeling blood trickle down the side of her face as she leaned against the wall. "Just like when I threw him with the Force, he copied you."
"And he still has that ability to project his pain," Alema nodded, gingerly removing a piece of shrapnel from her arm.
Tenel Ka's eyes snapped open. "Lord Nyax is heading towards Jacen's location!"
A bemused Alema watched as Tenel Ka leap back to the ground floor in a single bound. It was as if the warrior princess hadn't been Force pushed off a several meter drop and had several tons of space fighter dropped on her.
"Okay, what is it with those Solos!" Alema scrambled once more to catch up.
Racing down the hallways of the temple-turned-museum, Alema found herself moving deeper and deeper into the temple's depths. She didn't really need the Force to guide her. Sealed doors were cut open, automated lighting systems were flickering on and off, door-frames were carved away to accommodate a certain over-sized Sith, not to mention the rapid footsteps of Tenel Ka.
One thing she definitely noticed was how the very air around her seemed to grow stronger and stronger in the Force. An ocean analogy came to mind. She was wading from the shore into something much deeper, more vast than anything she could handle. The hallways nearly pitch black as she continued her descent. Coupled with the intensity of

the Force, images, emotions, things that once were and never will be, flickered all around her.
Alema stretched out with her own senses, 'seeing' the intricate carvings that decorated the wall, so rich with history. She continued forward, passing through a room littered with toppled shelves, coated with dust. A piece of history frozen in time.
Deeper still, Alema saw flashes of Jedi going about their daily business, a group of younglings with training sabers. The Force was thick in the air, guiding her through the visions of the past. As it did, however, Alema felt her own abilities become heightened. Everything around her appeared sharper, her connection to the mystical energies surrounding her deepening.
The Twi'lek exhaled softly, there was a power to this place, oh so tempting. All she had to do was open herself up to it. There she was, basking in its power, reaching up and pulling coralskippers out of the air. Lifting whole buildings and smashing everyone below. It wouldn't mean that she was going dark, she'd be stopping the Vong from hurting anyone else with her power. She'd be protecting her friends. Besides, if Lord Nyax had access to the same power, it'd only be fair if she evened the odds. No sense crippling herself. Alema shook her head and the visions disappeared.
She found herself standing at the very top of a long staircase leading straight down. Lord Nyax and Tenel Ka were just ahead. Where Jacen was, Alema didn't know, the Force pervading the room was too strong and she had never been that close to the pacifistic member of the Solo family. Taking a breath, Alema took the stairs three at a time. She skipped the last flight entirely and found herself stunned at the sight before her.
She had come out onto a balcony of sorts that over looked a towering, barrel vaulted chamber. Statues of Jedi, long gone, lined the walls, and an elaborate network of arches and crossbeams stretched out across the length and width of the room. A corner of the gaping chamber had suffered serious damage, but whether the crumbling masonry and burnt rock was a recent addition from the invasion, or left over scars of another era was anyone's guess. The sheer size and grandeur of the room was impressive, yes, but it had obviously been constructed with a purpose.
Illuminating everything in a glaring orange light was a visible nexus of Force energy, still going as strong as ever. Four, ceiling-high statues surrounded the pure beam of light, stone hands outstretched as if they were warming themselves by its radiance.
This was the heart of the temple.

Alema felt her chest thud loudly, her whole body shaking as if each beat of the temple's heart resonated with her own. Below her, she could see Tenel Ka and Lord Nyax. The former was blocking the latter from the stream of Force energy spiraling up out of the ground. Though Tenel Ka was empowered by the aura the nexus was giving off, so too was Lord Nyax. And he acted on much baser levels than Tenel Ka.
He charged with a snarl, frustrated that a puny Jedi was between himself and his goal. Tenel Ka turned his many blades aside, only to be sent flying with a wave of Lord Nyax's hand.
Alema swiftly leaped from arch to arch, before launching a spinning attack of her own from above.
So close to his goal, Lord Nyax was once more forced to recoil as the second Jedi landed scant centimeters away. He attempted to cripple the two Jedi with fear. But after experiencing his attack many times before, both Jedi shrugged off his mental assault by closing their minds from him. Lord Nyax did not like that, and when something happens that displeases him, what was left of his mind regressed into pure rage. He unleashed an all-out fury, slicing, slashing, alternating between blasts of Force energy and mental assaults. A lightsaber toss brought several dozen pounds of masonry down over Tenel Ka, before Lord Nyax lunged at Alema both physically and mentally.
"You want to know something?" Alema hissed, equally enraged as yet another blast of Force terror brought up memories she would rather forget. "If you keep poking a dangerous animal, you'll eventually get your hand ripped off. And I am definitely dangerous."
Lord Nyax responded to her aggression by stalking towards her, intending to bring this Jedi to her knees. He advanced, blades glowing and his mind focused on the Jedi before him. Just when victory was in his grasp, however, the eyes of the blue-skinned Jedi flickered. Lord Nyax suddenly felt as if his mind had just been torn asunder. He howled an inhuman howl, staggering backwards as blood began to pour from his ears and nose.
Alema kept her remorseless gaze on the abomination, an open hand held out towards the creatures head. Lord Nyax's brain was part synthetic, yes, but the part that wasn't could definitely still feel the effects of Alema's Force attack. Slowly, very slowly, she began to close her hand, her eyes fluttering as she visualized Lord Nyax's brain being squeezed in a vise.
But, Lord Nyax would not go down without a fight. He was pure instinct after all, and he did the first thing any wounded animal would do; he lashed out. The powerful blast of Force energy rocked Alema's head like a sledgehammer, dropping the Twi'lek in a heartbeat.

Fortunately, Lord Nyax didn't seem to be in any mood to fight. He was still yowling in agony, his crazed eyes, bloodshot. His lightsabers deactivated and with one last cry, he took off towards the far corner of the room. He clambered over the pile of debris and disappeared through the hole in the ceiling.
With the threat gone, Tenel Ka allowed her muscles to relax. Though she was still pinned beneath several slabs of rock, she no longer had to worry about getting cut down.
She was just about to free herself, when the slabs covering her were levitated by another. Her head jerked up towards the source, her mouth going dry.
Looking haggard in shredded clothing, with the beginnings of a beard developing on his usually baby-smooth face, was Jacen Solo. Tenel Ka's relief was brief when she saw the bird-like Vergere standing behind him.
"Jacen," Tenel Ka breathed, trying to force herself to stand but stumbling as her bruised legs gave out.
Jacen caught her before she fell and raised an eyebrow. "What are you doing here?"
Evaluating her condition, Tenel Ka offered him a faint smile. "Rescuing you."
"Anakin's idea?" Jacen said, shaking his head. "Don't answer, I felt him earlier and only he'd be foolish enough to travel all the way here. I'm just surprised that *you* actually agreed with his plan."
Tenel Ka rested against one of the statues. "Would you have me leave you to torment in the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong?"
"Yes," Jacen hissed, moving to Alema's still form. "Anakin obviously hasn't learned anything since Myrkr, and he's dragged you and the others into another mess of his making." He gestured to Alema. "This is exactly why you should have stopped him."
"We all agreed with him because we wanted to save you, Jacen. When you cut yourself off from us, what were we supposed to think?"
"That I was dead!" Jacen paused after his outburst and rubbed at his face. Tiredly, he looked up from his examination of Alema. "And now all of you are in danger again. I sacrificed myself, endured the worst they could do to me so that all of you could live your lives. Not so you could all get captured because my little brother doesn't know his limits."
Tenel Ka cocked her head. "You are lucky that you have a family willing to risk their lives to save you. My own tries to kill me any chance they have."
"Forgive him, he has been through much," Vergere interjected. "The arrival of yourself and the others wasn't expected and has…shocked

him. Had you waited, we would have found a way off this planet. But I guess, impatience has always been a part of being young."
"Why is Vergere still with you?" Tenel Ka asked, ignoring the figure in Jacen's shadow.
"She's helping me gain a better understanding of the Force." He shifted, and the bags under Jacen's eyes became more pronounced under the glow of the nearby Force nexus. "Don't blame her for my decisions. Can you tell me what happened to Jaina? I can barely feel her."
"I…I am unsure myself," Tenel Ka felt Zekk and the others approach, they were just entering the temple. "Her Force presence temporarily merged with Tahiri's, then something happened and she was expelled. She has not awakened since. We were hoping that you could help her."
"I'll put it on my 'things to do list,' then," Jacen muttered, stepping towards the vortex of Force energy.
"You are fortunate that this is a powerful nexus, Jacen," Vergere said lightly, her bird-like head cocking to the side. "You can heal your friends and still have enough energy for that other task you had in mind."
"Other task?"
Jacen looked away, sorrow emitted from every aspect of his body. "I'm going to sabotage the World Brain. Even though it's a living thing, I can't let the Yuuzhan Vong corrupt it."
Tenel Ka stepped forwards incredulously. "How did you plan to do that?"
"Well," Jacen smiled faintly, looking every bit like his younger brother for a moment. "I had intended to march up to it and ask the shapers there to let me interact with it. But with you all here, I had to come up with another plan."
Tenel Ka followed his gesture and glanced at the pulsating nexus. "You intend to use the Force energies of this temple?"
"It was Vergere's idea," Jacen said half-heartedly. "Once we realized that we wouldn't be able to get close to the brain, we discussed ways to reach it through the Force. This was the best option."
"You don't wish to follow Vergere's idea?" Tenel Ka raised an eyebrow.
"Do I want to permanently scar a large, sentient being just because the Yuuzhan Vong will use it to harm millions? No."
"There is no other way?"
"If you can think of one, let me know," Jacen's shoulders slumped. "I won't be killing it, or even hurting it. I'll just be stunting its growth. Even then, it really has no choice in how the Yuuzhan Vong use it. It's simply another victim in this war."

"If it is easier, Jacen," Vergere spoke up again. "Perhaps you should do it now, before the others arrive. It is easier to ask forgiveness than permission after all."
"I think he should wait," Tenel Ka glared. She had never trusted the bird-like creature, even now more than ever. While Jacen looked like death-warmed-over, Vergere looked all too smug, despite her contrite posture. "What you intend to do, after all, is wound another with the Force."
Jacen hesitated, glancing back and forth between Vergere and Tenel Ka. Finally, he exhaled and nodded, stepping back from the swirling nexus of Force energy. "You're right, Tenel Ka."
Tenel Ka felt herself un-tense, her heart resuming its normal beat. "Of course. I am always right."
Both missed the slight narrowing of Vergere's eyes.
Jacen leaned against the nearest statue and slid to the ground. "I still can't believe you and the others are here. I almost feel like I'm hallucinating again."
Tenel Ka crouched down and placed a hand on his shoulder. "We are not hallucinations, Jacen. We are here to rescue you."
Jacen's eyes fluttered close, his breathing low and strained. "I think I'll start believing it when I'm off this planet."
In the background, Anakin and Zekk, supporting the still unconscious Tahiri and Jaina, dropped through the same hole that Lord Nyax had escaped from.
Jacen glanced wearily at them and sighed. "Anakin, Zekk."
"Jacen, you're looking…."
"Like I was trampled by a herd of bantha, I know," Jacen finished for Zekk. "Tenel Ka explained what happened to Jaina and Tahiri."
"Can you do anything for them?"
"I guess we'll find out," Jacen shrug. "Jedi don't 'try' anything after all."
Jacen ignored his brother as he helped Zekk lay Jaina out before the nexus of Force energy.
"Hello to you too, Jace," Anakin said wryly.
"Still not thinking about the consequences of your actions, Anakin?"
"You saved Tahiri and I on Yavin, and then on Myrkr. I'm just returning a favor."
"On Yavin, I was backed by a Star Destroyer, Jaina, and a squadron of fighters, and I had a way out. You, however, are going to get yourself and everyone killed."
"Have some confidence in me, Jacen."

"I would if I wasn't looking at Alema, Tahiri, and Jaina," Jacen retorted. "Don't get me wrong. I want nothing more than to be off this planet. But not if my freedom is at the cost of your lives."
"You'd rather I politely asked the Vong to release you?" Anakin shot back.
"Perhaps," Tenel Ka interjected. "This is a conversation to have another time. We still have the matter of Jaina and Tahiri to attend to. Not to mention that we need a way off this planet."
Jacen sagged and nodded. "You're right. And, for what it's worth Anakin, thanks for coming to my rescue."
Anakin simply closed his eyes and dropped and back into a meditative pose. Both Zekk and Tenel Ka looked uneasily between the two brothers, the tension thick and uncomfortable. Jacen stared at Anakin for a minute, then looked away impassively. Instead, he sat down by Jaina's head and placed a hand on her head, concentrating.
After only a couple of seconds, he frowned and glanced up at Tenel Ka and Zekk with a bewildered expression. "I know you told me what happened, Tenel Ka, but are you sure you didn't leave anything out?"
"Not intentionally," Tenel Ka said. "Why?"
"There's nothing 'Jaina' in her head."
"What do you mean?" Zekk frowned.
Jacen agitatedly ran a hand through his hair. "I mean that there's nothing of Jaina left. Her brain, her Force presence…I don't know how to describe it. It's almost like someone carved out a part of her brain and left a traumatized half behind."
"You can fix her, though, right?" Zekk said, a hint of distress bleeding through into his voice.
Jacen exhaled. "Even if I tried, I wouldn't know where to begin. I'm no healer and Jaina isn't responding to me at all."
"Jacen," the almost forgotten Vergere whispered. "This *is* something you can do. It is in your power."
"Vergere, this is my sister's mind we're talking about!"
"Nevertheless, I have faith in you. You are not alone either. Behind you is the combined presence of all the Jedi who once walked through the halls of this temple. Their powers can be yours to direct, to bring your sister back."
Jacen looked over his shoulder at the nexus of Force energy, then back to his sister, then to Vergere. "No, I won't take that risk."
"It is your sister."
"Exactly, that's why I won't risk it. I've never attempted what you are suggesting, and I won't let my sister be harmed because I was overconfident in my abilities."

Vergere's feathers rippled slightly and she nodded. "Very well, Jacen. I respect your decision. A true Jedi, after all, know their limits. Does this mean that you will also not use the nexus to disable to World Brain?"
"What is she talking about?" Zekk spoke up, glancing to Tenel Ka for an answer.
"To prevent the Vong from gaining full control of this planet, Jacen intended to sabotage the World Brain they are currently growing. Our arrival complicated his plans and he now is contemplating using the nexus to strike from afar. He will stunt the World Brain's growth to keep it from reaching its full potential."
"That sounds suspiciously like something a dark-side user would do."
"I know," Jacen answered. "But if we leave the brain as it is, the Vong will be able to cement their control of this region of space. In my time as their prisoner, I've learned a lot. Not only is it physically important, the World Brain is also a symbolic and religious anchor to the Vong. If you can think of a better way, Zekk, I'm all ears."
"Can you talk with the World Brain, convince it to stop helping the Vong?"
Jacen shook his head. "No, the World Brain doesn't recognize friend or foe, it just is. Think of it like a giant tree, stretching its limbs throughout the planet. Its fruit are what the Vong use, its sap their life-blood. The more it matures, the better the produce it creates. I can give it orders, but it is not aware of the world beyond its reach, has no comprehension of what it is being used for."
Zekk exhaled shakily. He knew how thin the line was between dark and light. Should he allow Jacen to disable an entirely innocent creature to save the lives of many, or should he let the creature grow at the expense of any chance of taking back the system. Yet, according to Jacen's explanation, the creature would not even be harmed. It would simply stop growing prematurely. It would still live. Did they have the right? A quick check of Tenel Ka revealed that the warrior-soon-to-be-queen was equally torn. Tenel Ka, however, spoke before Zekk could deliver his own verdict.
"I believe that you should do it, Jacen," Tenel Ka said, her voice even, even though agreeing with Vergere's plan left a bitter taste in her mouth. "One life for many. Where a later strike by the Republic might kill the creature, you will keep it from becoming a threat. It may stop growing, but it will still live."
"I agree," Zekk said reluctantly. "This is a good chance to stop a potential problem from developing. As much as I hate it, Tenel Ka is right. If we act now, the World Brain can live out the rest of its life without becoming a military target. Psychologically, the Vong will also

suffer if the brain stops growing. I know you hate hurting creatures, so I trust you will be as painless as possible."
Jacen's expression softened. "I will, I promise."
"Then," Zekk took a deep breath. "Do it."
Though Jacen acknowledged Zekk's decision, he made no move to the nexus. Instead, he moved to his younger brother and squatted down in front of him. "Anakin?"
Anakin remained silent.
"Anakin, what's your opinion on this? I don't want to assume anything either way, I already made that mistake once."
Anakin was silent for several long minutes, before responding tersely. "I'm meditating, Jacen, do what you think is right."
Jacen was inscrutable as he withdrew back towards the nexus. Basking in the powerful waves of Force energy flowing from it, he glanced back at his companions one last time. Then, Jacen stepped into the nexus. He closed his eyes as he felt the power wrap around him, lifting him up into the air. Ever cell in his being felt warm, good, the thoughts and emotions of Jedi long gone swirling around him like a summer breeze. Jacen took it all in, his senses expanding. Suddenly, he was aware of the entire Jedi Temple, every mote of dust, every statue. His awareness grew, he could see the streets, the crumbling buildings in the blocks around them. Even further, he could see the debris in orbit, the distant lakes and artificial mountains.
As he stretched out as far as he could, he was suddenly aware of the infantile World Brain. Though it was of Vong creation, he could see it, a hazy shadow that existed just outside the Force as most knew it. However, thanks to Vergere, he had had a slaveseed embedded in him. That singular seed helped him connect to the Force on a level he hadn't been able to before. That, coupled with the power flowing through him from the Force nexus, enabled him to easily make contact with the creature. He reached out and mentally petted it. It responded positively, and Jacen felt a twinge of guilt. Still in contact, he continued to relay his emotions and feelings into the creature.
Pride, accomplishment, reassurance that it was fulfilling its purpose. Comfort, it didn't have to grow anymore. It had become all he hoped it would be. Jacen continued to mentally massage the World Brain, subtly causing the release of various chemicals and hormones to shut down its growth. The dual emotional and physical promptings gradually began to grow in strength, from a near silent whisper to a blaring command. Each prompt sent a pulse of Force energy coursing through the planet and into the creature. Until, finally, the entire nexus

wrapped itself around Jacen and released a tidal wave of emotions and energy that traveled throughout the entirety of the planet.
Tenel Ka and Zekk were knocked off their feet, and even Anakin's eyes flew wide open as his meditations were buffeted by the powerful Force blast. The side-effect of the final attack, however, blew apart several of the ancient supporting arches and brought down large segments of the ceiling. Rather than fall, however, the debris was dragged towards Jacen's levitating form. The nexus of energy around him was now flailing wildly, lashing out and ripping apart the roof of the room, sending coralskipper –sized rock hurling out into the sky. The ground cracked beneath their feet and one of the statues guarding the nexus came crashing down with a thunderous roar.
"Jacen!" Tenel Ka tried to yell over the cacophony.
The Force continued to run wild, Jacen's body glowing as the tattered remains of his clothes fluttered about. There was no indication that he heard, only the whirlwind of Force energy whipping harshly through the room and washing across the planet. The ceiling continued to crumble, the walls of the room threatening to burst apart into dust.
But only several seconds later, the glow surrounding Jacen began to dissipate, and the tempest subsided as Jacen was lowered back to the ground. In contrast to before, the room was dry and arid, no longer teeming with the Force. Zekk, Anakin, and Tenel Ka rushed to his side, well aware that the remaining Force energies appeared to have concentrated themselves within Jacen's body.
"Do not worry," Vergere commented mildly. "It will take more than that to kill a Solo."
"You knew this would happen?" Tenel Ka said sharply, pulling Jacen's head into her lap.
"Of course, one does not walk into a power generator and not receive side-effects," Vergere said. "He is unharmed. His body simply needs to adapt to the additional Force potential he has gained."
"What are you talking about? "Zekk scowled.
"Jacen Solo will be more powerful than before," Vergere said calmly. "He has absorbed the Force nexus of the Jedi Temple. Though he unleashed most of it across the planet, he still has gained much. "
"How much?" Anakin questioned.
"Oh, more than enough to surpass you, my young friend," Vergere chirped jovially. "But do not worry, he is your brother. Despite your disagreements, I do not foresee him raising his blade against you."
Anakin raised an eyebrow. "No one said he was."
"My mistake then," Vergere replied. "Though I could have sworn that that very image had been at the forefront of your mind."

Any further conversation was stalled by the arrival of several coralskippers that had been sent to investigate the massive disturbance.
"Great, now we have Tahiri, Alema, Jaina, *and* Jacen unconscious," Zekk remarked.
"It is of no consequence." Vergere held out a hand and levitated all four at once. "We will proceed to the temple's hanger bay. There is bound to be a relic left over."
"Won't any ship we do find be over fifty years old?
"Since the Jedi fled the temple, the hanger was one of the many rooms that was sealed off from the public. I highly doubt that the Emperor would have spent the time or resources to empty the hanger completely."
"Even then, there's a Yuuzhan Vong fleet in orbit," Zekk argued. "I doubt any of the surviving vessels will last a single round with even the smallest of coralskippers."
"We have little choice," Tenel Ka added, her eyes on the Vong ships in the air. "They are deploying soldiers."
Vine-like ropes were unfurled from several hovering platforms and warriors began to clamber down.
"Let us move," Vergere agreed. "And hope that the Force is with us."
|* *|*
"Give in!"
Tahiri clasped her hands over her ears shaking her head. "Shut up!"
"You have no other choice," Riina commented from behind.
A third presence chose that moment to make his appearance. "There's always a choice."
As one, both Tahiri and Riina spun towards the source.
"You!"
"Jacen!"
"Tahiri," Jacen said mildly.
"Jacen….how…?"
"The slaveseed Vergere planted in me," Jacen motioned to his chest. "Helps me sense Vong, just like Anakin can."
"Jacen, I….Jaina…I didn't mean…."
"It's okay," Jacen said reassuringly. "I'll fix her up after this. I just wanted to see why I could feel you with both Force and Vongsense."
"And Anakin?"
"Worried about you, though he's trying to hide it."
Tahiri smiled faintly. "He's always bad about hiding his emotions."
"That he is."
"Leave!" Riina hissed.

Jacen raised an eyebrow and took a step forwards, causing Riina to flinch. "Nice to meet you too. Anyways, Tahiri, how *did* Jaina end up in your mind?"
At this, Tahiri flushed slightly and mumbled something.
"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."
"She felt like Anakin," Tahiri said softly. "I could feel Riina trying to take over and in a panic I reached out for him. Her presence is so much like his that I kind of just…well…"
"So, she's Riina?" Jacen jerked his head towards her scowling doppelganger.
"Yeah."
"I could get rid of her if you want me to."
Tahiri's head whipped up so fast it was a surprise she didn't hurt herself. "You can?"
"I absorbed the nexus of Force energies from the Jedi temple. Before I try fixing Jaina's mind, I thought I'd get to the source of the problem first."
Tahiri looked back and forth between Riina and Jacen, swallowing heavily as she did. Finally, she worked her jaw and shook her head once. "No."
"No?" Jacen said, a smile entertaining his features.
"No, she's right. This is my mess. I have to be the one to fix it."
"Alright then, how are you going to do that? She's a part of you."
This time it was Tahiri who took a step forwards. Faster than Riina could react, Tahiri's hand shot out and gripped the human/Vong girl's arm. "I think I understand now."
Riina glanced down at Tahiri's hand.
"I know what you're thinking," Riina hissed. "You mustn't do what you have planned, you'll only make things worse. Jacen doesn't want to help us, he wants to keep you caged in here, with me. You slew his sister after all. Join me, and together we can survive, only then can we continue to live."
"You wanted me to kill Jaina because you knew she would stop you," Tahiri said, her voice soft, her hair falling forwards to shield her face. "Even when I hurt her, Jacen is now here. And I know that even if I ignored him, Anakin would be next. You spoke the truth when you said that we could never be separated. You tried your best to isolate me, feeling that if I embrace the dark side, I will become a prisoner of these shadow lands. You said you wanted to become the dominant personality because only you have the strength to protect Anakin."
"All those are true," Riina acknowledged.

"Then we have a problem," Tahiri said, tightening her grip on Riina's forearm. "Because, you see, I have a family that loves and supports me. We look out for each other. Without them, I'd be a lost, scared little girl, Shaped by the Vong. Jacen's presence now has just reminded me that I don't need you."
Riina snarled and tried to pull away, but Tahiri held tight. Tahiri's fingers were slick with blood, hers and Riina's, but her will was strong.
"It's time," Tahiri said, as flesh began to merge. "It's time I rejoined my family."
I* *I
"Your Eminence."
High Priest Naazar turned to face his subordinate. "Speak, Khadal."
"Our Peace Brigade allies on Hapes have failed. We are intercepting reports that the *Jeedai* queen has regained control of her planet. The forces we sent to assist are being hunted down."
"And the *Jeedai*?"
"We have no information as to how many are alive. All we know is that the *Stalking Claw* departed for Coruscant with two captured *Jeedai* at the beginning of the battle, among them is the Jaina Solo."
Naazar frowned. "I left specific orders to all ships that any *Jeedai* were to be delivered here."
"The Supreme Overlord must have had agents onboard, as the captain of the *Stalking Claw* claimed that the gift of the Solo child was for the Supreme One himself."
"So, out of the many *Jeedai* on the planet, out of the five hundred warriors we sent down, we only managed to recover two *Jeedai* children?"
"Yes, your Eminence."
"Khadal, send word to the rest of the fleet, ready for engagement. When we are done with it, the planet of Hapes shall be nothing more than a burning rock."
"It will take a full day to move the fleet into position."
"A day, two, it does not matter. Hapes *will* die, I swear this to the gods."
I* Chapter End *I
A/N: Happy Holidays to all and I hope all of you have a great 2012! Another double-post this week because my birthday's on the 30th! Well that, and this is my holiday present to all my readers out there, namely, Dark Sabre, Tahiri, Toast, Pslams, Nadreth, Adapt, Akatsuki, Furyan, Etain, the unnamed reviewer, and Kuroi. Thanks for your continued support and glowing reviews. All of your feedback is what has motivated me to so far write at least two chapters a week! (I'm

pretty sure I won't be able to keep this pace up for long…or at least I really hope I don't keep this pace up!). Most importantly, I'd like to give the biggest thanks to QuixoticQuest, who's initial support back in Feburary-March of this year gave me the confidence I needed to write the story.
11/7/12: Minor edits.

ADA 8

Eight
I**I

The atmosphere in the control room within the Hapan palace was tense as reports from scout vessels continued to come in. The fact that the number of reports was steadily dwindling as the news of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet grew more frantic, was a testament to the danger that was fast approaching the planet. The Ni'Korish and Yuuzhan Vong raid had wreaked havoc all across Hapes. Communications systems were down, the planet-side hangars out of commission, turbolaser batteries and shield emitters non-functional. For all intents and purposes, the planet was nothing more than a massive target.
The loss of the planet-side hangars was not that big a blow. What little ships remained would have been ineffectual against the size of the approaching force. But without any communications, there was no way to signal Jagged Fel and the recovered fleet within the nebula. Without turbolaser batteries and shields, the planet had no way to defend itself. Pockets of forces loyal to Alyssia continued to fight, even if their chosen queen was no longer among the living. The remaining Vong warriors had switched to suicide tactics, using one or two warriors to detonate munitions factories or power plants.
"Twenty-two hours, huh," Ganner rubbed at his face tiredly. "We have twenty-two hours to come up with some plan to stop a fleet about a third of the size of the one that took Coruscant."
The holo-emitter before him displayed the Hapan system, with a large block of red just outside the orbit of the furthest planet representing the position of the approaching Yuuzhan Vong fleet. Only a couple of gas giants and an asteroid belt stood between the invaders and the inhabited planets in the system. The only reprieve was that the massive force was approaching from one specific direction and had yet to spread out throughout the entire system.
"We could always throw rocks at them. It worked for the Ewoks," Mirax said optimistically, lobbing a small pebble through the holographic

representation. "Have we had any luck getting in contact with Captain Fel yet?"
"No," Captain Livette shook her head. "The Ni'Korish control a battle cruiser and a destroyer in orbit. They shot down our last few messengers."
"Before communications went down, Queen Mother Teneniel sent the remaining local group of the Royal Navy to the far side of the planet," another officer spoke up. "They only number seven capital ships, a dozen support vessels, and two wings of fighters, so we're saving them for the primary engagement."
"Even with Jagged's reinforcements, we'll still be outnumbered nine to one," Mara said grimly, gripping the edge of the holo-projector.
"Let us hope that my daughter entrusted the Hapan fleet with the right person then," Teneniel said from the head of the table. "Time and time again, smaller numbers have prevailed against impossible odds. Nine to one is not so impossible that we have no chance of survival."
"And here I thought only Corellians were that optimistic," Kyp pulled up another star chart. "Here, Kavan. It's in the opposite direction from the Vong fleet and has a network of tunnels that can help us. We can stash supplies and refugees there and use it as a secondary command center if we can't hold Hapes."
"Given the situation, having a fallback point would be useful," Mara agreed.
"Then if you would, Master Skywalker," Teneniel addressed Mara. "Coordinate efforts with Captain Livette and begin the transference of non-essential personnel. Jedi Tesar and Lowbacca, if you could assist her."
"Your Majesty." The three Jedi and Captain Livette left the main table to discuss the logistics at another bank of computers.
Teneniel addressed the rest of the group. "Alyssia, as determined as she was, was not aware of another project I was overseeing. A prototype Battle Dragon stored in a secret hangar in the planet's north pole. Its targeting systems have been upgraded to countermand the Dragon's primary weakness, and, in an exchange for a decrease in its armament, it utilizes experimental fast-fire technology. It has yet to leave dry-dock, but I fear that unless we get it underway soon, it will never have a chance. General Solo, would you do Hapes the honor of advising its captain?"
"Me?" Han swallowed.
"Very few of Hapes' officers have seen combat for prolonged periods of time, much less against the Yuuzhan Vong, your assistance will be invaluable aboard the *Flames of Dathomir.*"

"You named a Hapan ship the 'Flames of Dathomir'?"
Teneniel's eyes twinkled for a fraction of a second, before she became impassive once more. "Like me, the construction of such a vessel met with fierce opposition. Many did not like the departure from the standard Battle Dragon design, nor did they care for the resources spent on the vessel. Three Battle Dragons could have been made for the credits spent on this prototype. The name seemed….appropriate."
"I think I see where Tenel Ka gets it from," Ganner chuckled under his breath.
Teneniel turned her attention to him. "Jedi Rhysode, would you be willing to join General Solo aboard the *Flames of Dathomir*? One who is Force sensitive, such as yourself, will allow for better coordination with the others."
"If you think I'll be of any help," Ganner nodded, quickly glance towards Han.
"Welcome aboard, kid."
"Since it has yet to leave dry-dock, the *Flames* has not yet received its detachment of fighters," Teneniel warned. "There is only a single squadron of X-Wings stationed at the hangar, so they will be all the support you will have. You can rendezvous with the rest of the Royal Navy stationed behind the outer most of our moons, or attempt to reach Fleet Captain Fel through the two Ni'Korish vessels. The choice is yours."
"Is it possible to capture the two vessels?" Han asked, earning a few raised eyebrows and pensive looks. "I mean, we're going to need all the ships we can get."
"I can lead the assault," Corran volunteered. "I have some experience with larger military vessels. We can use the *Flames* to shield several smaller craft and board the Ni'Korish ships while they're focused on the Battle Dragon."
"That sounds like a job for the Dozen," Kyp folded his arms in front of him. "They're still stationed a couple cities over, but I can deliver the plans personally. A Hapan battle cruiser and a destroyer should be a piece of cake compared to the Vong frigates."
"Once our Jedi friends take the Ni'Korish ships, we'll join up with and update Jagged," Han said in approval. "Provided, we have your permission, your Highness?"
"If you are certain you can pull it off, then you have my blessings," Teneniel consented.
"I'll go get the rest of the Dozen, then." Kyp stood.
Corran mimicked the other Jedi's actions. "I'll go with you. I came in the *Skate* so I'm going to need a fighter."

"It's been awhile, you sure you aren't a bit rusty, Master Horn?" Kyp said lightly as they left the room.
"I've been flying longer than you have, Durron. I bet I can still teach you kids a few tricks."
"That, I've got to see."
The doors slid shut behind the departing Jedi, while Mirax simply shook her head in amusement. "I told him he'd been away from an X-Wing for too long."
Han chuckled, briefly leaning forward to kiss Leia. "Well, I'd better get going too. I'm going to find out if I still have a couple of battles left in me as well."
"May the Force be with you," Leia whispered.
Han inclined his head. "Hey, I'm coming back."
"Yes," Teneniel interjected in the same dry tone normally used by her daughter. "It would take someone of extreme incompetence to get a prototype, very expensive, and powerful Battle Dragon destroyed on her maiden flight. Even against the odds we face."
"There, you see? The queen has spoken." Han winked at Leia, before clapping a hand on Ganner's shoulder. "Come on Rhysode, our ship awaits us."
Ganner groaned. "Why do I have a bad feeling about this?"
|* *|
*She didn't know who she was. Didn't know why she was here, in an endless, swirling void. She only knew that she was at peace. She had no worries or fears, no joys or sorrows. She simply just **was**, floating aimlessly in this never ending ocean.*
"Come back."
A voice pierced the inky darkness around her.
Who was it talking to? Come back to where? In fact, who was calling her? She did not remember. She did not understand. The questions did not stop, bombarding her mind incessantly.
"Jaina, come back!"
Jaina? The name was familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. Couldn't remember where she had heard it before. Did it matter? She absently repeated the name in her head, and with the sound came a heavy burden. She didn't want it. She wanted to remain where she was, blissful, content.
"Jaina! I'm sorry!"
A different voice. Again, calling out to this 'Jaina' character. Were they talking to her? Was she this 'Jaina' they were calling for? They sounded desperate.

"I'm beginning to reconstruct her memories from my own, keep her attention." The first voice said, almost frantically.
"What do I say?"
"Anything! Just keep her mind occupied with our presences. I need Jaina to maintain the link for this to work!"
A sharp jolt raced through her body, and suddenly it was as though a bucket of ice water had been splashed over her.
Jaina
*That **was** her name. She was Jaina. But how did she know that? Like a holo-vid, images began to flash in front of her. An apartment on Coruscant, forests on Yavin, an amusement park on Bespin. Locations, faces, names, some had meanings, others appeared to be little more than pictures to her eye.*
She blinked, she had a body now. She held up a hand in front of her face.
"Jaina, I have to apologize for attacking you." The second voice spoke, the sound echoing loudly in the void Jaina found herself in. "Our old self was frightened and confused when she raised her blade against you. She had meant to bring Anakin to help her, but in a good way, it is a good thing she didn't. I doubt she would have been able to come to an agreement with our other self if he had been here."
A new image flashed through Jaina's mind. The second voice now had a face, a name, Tahiri. Why was this person important?
The answer came to her once more, Anakin. That's right; Tahiri was her younger brother's closest friend and confidant. In the background, Jaina heard Tahiri continue, almost rhythmic in the way she spoke. Three scars, vivid on pale flesh, barely hidden by curly blonde hair. Two images of Tahiri, one scarred, the other in Jedi robes, meeting, coming together and joining. Yuuzhan Vong meeting Jedi, neither rejecting the other. But combining, becoming something more. Memories, forgotten and now recovered. Jaina's eyes bulged, how could she forget her own identity, her duty as a Jedi and pilot for the New Republic?
"That's it," the first voice sounded tired, tired but relieved. "Come on, Jaina."
Realization. "Jacen?"
"Yeah, welcome back."
"I...I barely remember....Jacen?"
"About that, I only managed to restore enough of your memories to restore your personality. Some of your own memories might come back by themselves, but I'll have to finish the rest later. I never knew that restoring a mind could be so tiring."

"Restoring..."
"That's partially my fault," Tahiri's wince was clear with her words.
"And you are Tahiri," Jaina repeated faintly, trying to test her own memory. "Tahiri Veila."
There was a pregnant pause. "I am Tahiri Veila no longer. Like you, I'm still in the process of putting my head back together. I'm responsible for your condition."
"We can fill you in on what happened later, but you have to wake up, Jaina."
"Aren't I awake now?"
"Oh, right, okay. One last memory dump, Tahiri, you're going to have to help me out with this one."
"What do I do?"
"Just recall everything you can remember after Myrkr. Sorry Jaina, but this might really hurt."
Before Jaina could respond, pain, a seemingly unending pain exploded behind her eyes. She collapsed to her knees, gripping her head. It was as if her mind was expanding and contracting at rapid intervals. Then, just like that, memories she hadn't had before suddenly appeared, as if they had been there all along.
Myrkr, Hapes, Coruscant, everything.
"Anakin! Jacen, is he..."
"He's alright."
Jaina blinked, there was a strange curtness to Jacen's clipped reply.
"Like I said Jaina, we can talk more later. The others need you."
She took a deep breath and nodded. "Right, talking later."
"See you in a bit, sis."
"Tell Anakin I...no, wait, I'll tell him that. If he'll still have the new me, that is."
"Okay. Thanks you two. Fixing up my mind couldn't have been easy."
Exhaling one last time, Jaina closed her eyes.
She awoke and found herself on hell's doorstep.
|* *|
Several minutes earlier
"This was the hangar for the Jedi during the Clone Wars?" Zekk whispered reverently as the group of young Jedi plus Vergere traversed dust covered floors.
All around were aging, covered vessels, many in a state of very poor disrepair. It was almost like walking through a tomb, a chamber untouched since the fall of the old Jedi Order.

"These do not look like they will be space-worthy," Tenel Ka said worriedly, uncovering a triangle-shaped fighter only to see one of the wing-tips come crashing to the hangar floor.
"They aren't even hyperspace capable," Anakin said, checking another.
"Or have any engines," Zekk straightened out from under a third.
"The Emperor did not see the need to maintain these vessels once he had purged the Jedi," Vergere said, sounding almost amused. "Most of these ships have been cannibalized for parts."
Zekk blinked. "That doesn't exactly help us."
Vergere turned her head and flapped her bird-like arms once. "There is one ship I know of that will have most likely survived, if not for sentimental reasons, then because it is…unique."
"Unique?"
"Follow me."
With the cargo skiff carrying Jaina, Jacen, Alema, and Tahiri hovering behind them, the remaining young Jedi followed the mysterious Fosh into another part of the hangar. Though the only lights came from their lightsabers, they were able to see a grimy, rust covered ship, about the size of a small freighter.
"This was a Jedi ship?" Zekk said.
"It looks more like a bucket of bolts slapped together," Anakin agreed.
"Nevertheless, it is a ship, and it should be hyperspace capable."
"We do have a small problem of the hangar doors being shut," Zekk pointed out. "That and I doubt the ship has any fuel."
"One problem at a time," Anakin said grimly. "Let's hope the thing even starts."
They approached the vessel, noting the folded-wing design and heavy modifications, as well as various burns and blaster damage that pockmarked the armor. Pushing the cargo skiff along the length of the vessel, searching for a way in, Tenel Ka passed by the ship's name and held up her lightsaber to get a better look.
"The letters are a bit worn, but it appears that this ship was called the *Light*."
Anakin turned back to the red-haired Jedi. "The '*Light*'?"
"It is a Jedi ship after all," Zekk shrugged.
"I found the hatch," Vergere interrupted. "Perhaps we should hurry. I have no doubt that the Yuuzhan Vong will be scouring this building for the source of the earlier disturbance."
There was a hissing noise as the doors slid open.
"At least that works," Zekk said. He moved to the cargo skiff and began helping Tenel Ka unload its unconscious cargo.

Anakin, in the meantime, spotted a fueling station and made his way over to it. The Force was definitely with him this time around. Though the station had been drained prior to its decommissioning, there was just enough fuel at the bottom of the massive tank for their needs. The specialized storage tank had prevented the fuel from evaporating even after all this time.

Anakin quickly hooked the fuel lines up to the *Light* and, with some sputtering and unhealthy clinking noises, the last of the fuel was syphoned into the aging freighter.

After disconnecting the hose, Anakin ducked into the ship and headed to the cockpit. His short journey through the ship revealed the dust-covered insides and defunct rows of control panels.

"Will this thing even fly, Zekk?"

"According to the manual, this is a G9-Rigger type freighter, a real relic." Zekk waved a datapad in the air. "The memory banks and registry were wiped clean, so I have no idea who owned this grease bucket previously. But whoever did, upgraded every aspect of this ship. We're lucky everything is still recognizable. Actually, we're lucky this thing is running at all."

"Is that a yes?"

"I already did a quick diagnostic, practically everything is in the red," Zekk shrugged. "Whether we'll survive long enough to get to hyperspace is anyone's guess. This thing is ready to fly itself apart."

"Let's hope our streak of good luck hasn't ended yet," Anakin quipped. He inhaled sharply and gripped his lightsaber. "We have Vong on the way, let's get out of here."

Zekk swiveled back to the primary control console and flipped a few switches. The lights in the cockpits dimmed ominously, but just as suddenly sputtered back to life. A groaning noise traveled throughout the hangar as engines, over a half-century old, once again ignited. The ship wobbled and slowly rotated towards the hangar's exit.

Tenel Ka emerged from the back of the ship. "What about the hangar door?"

Zekk flicked open a button on the pilot's yoke and unleashed a barrage of blue laser fire on the thin doors. The doors glowed brightly under the onslaught of energy before crumpling out and away. "What door?"

Unfortunately, two coralskippers chose that moment to descend directly into their escape vector.

"Stang!" Zekk hissed, adjusting his grip on the yoke. "You two might want to get yourselves strapped in. The shields were one of the systems that were red-lined and don't work."

"No shields?"

"Again?" Tenel Ka tried her best to fight off a sense of déjà vu as she recalled a very recent, similar, shield-less escape.
Anakin and Tenel Ka scrambled to find a seat a split second before Zekk gunned the throttle. The Rigger-class freighter lurched forward, performing a barrel-roll that saw it slip into the narrow gap between the two coralskippers. The Yuuzhan Vong craft immediately looped around and gave chase.
Trying to pick himself off the floor, Anakin gripped a nearby chair as the ship rocked violently. "Zekk!"
"I know!"
A plasma missile hissed by them and detonated on a nearby structure. The top half began to collapse into their path. Another jerk of the throttle and Zekk had the ship bouncing under a larger piece of debris while the two pursuing fighters shot over it.
"We've picked up another two coralskippers," Tenel Ka said steadily as the ship was rocked once more.
"This thing has a swiveling laser turret," Zekk called out. "Someone take it!"
The *Light* swooped around another volley of magma and plasma projectiles, leaving exploding stars of dust and flame in its wake. Yet, the four coralskippers in pursuit stayed on them.
"Get us into space, Zekk!" Anakin yelled. He had taken over the laser turret, but the aged systems were no match for the singularity defenses of the Yuuzhan Vong crafts.
"Can't!" Zekk replied, sending the ship dipping under a walkway. "The skips are laying down a wave of fire above us! If I rise any higher, we'll be blown out of the sky!"
Warning sirens began to flash, and Tenel Ka looked over the control panel. "Hull temperature and engines are red-lining, we will not be able to maintain our current speed in the atmosphere of this planet."
"Doesn't matter anyways, we're leaving the cover of the city!"
The *Light* emerged from the shadows of the towering apartments and offices out across the waste and energy renewal plants; a sprawling network of generator towers and power couplings. The incessant fire from their pursuers caused rumbling explosions all around them as generators went up in flames. One of the explosions sent a twirling ball of shrapnel bouncing off the cockpit windshield, leaving a spidery line of cracks in its wake.
"I'm running out of moves here!" Zekk yelled.
"They just shot out the swivel turret," Anakin added. At the same time, he clenched his jaw in frustration. Had he just led everyone to their deaths? Was this going to be it?

"Get out of that chair!" The three of them froze in amazement as Jaina sprinted into the cockpit. "Come on Zekk! You fly worse than a spice-navigator on a week-long ale binge!"
Dumbfounded, Zekk did as he was told. "Jaina?"
"Explanations later!" Jaina hissed, pulling back on the yoke. The *Light* began to ascend.
"Are you crazy? We have no shields!" Zekk said in alarm.
Jaina flicked another couple of switches. "We have some deadweight in the cargo-hold. It'll work just as well!"
As the coralskippers adjusted their fire to zero in on the rising freighter, the cargo-bay doors of the human vessel opened. The combined fire of the four Yuuzhan Vong ships was on the verge of overtaking the *Light*, when a large object was jettisoned from the cargo-bay. The streaking arcs of plasma slammed into the jettisoned object, and the premature explosion caused the four coralskippers to hastily veer off.
"What was that?" Zekk's eyebrows were practically in his hair line.
"We had some type of yellow starfighter in the hold," Jaina explained. "It just saved our lives. We're on an outbound trajectory now."
The control console began to wail once more.
"Now what?"
Zekk's answer came in the form of a Worldship's silhouette, looming just off in the distance. Behind them, the four coralskippers broke off pursuit, gunning their engines as fast as they could in the atmosphere. Only a moment later, every single weapon on the Worldship, and those on the ships escorting it, opened fire. Sheets of yellow and red rained down from orbit as the concentrated fire obliterated a full square kilometer of Coruscant.
Sweat pouring down her bangs, Jaina juked and rolled the aging freighter. One lucky shot completely blew away the outrigger wing, sending the ship in an uncontrolled spin through the fiery rain. Jaina, however, quickly diverted power to one of the engines to change their spin, and the *Light* once again began to swim upstream of the raging torrent of fire around them.
Then, all at once, they left Coruscant's thermosphere and were in space.
"Zekk, punch in the calculations for the hyperspace jump and hurry!" Jaina commanded, silencing the multiple alarms that were adding to the chaos of the smoking cockpit.
"They're in! Go, go, go!"
"Still have to clear the gravity well! Ten seconds!"

"The coralskippers are reforming behind us," Tenel Ka said with maddening calm.
"Seven seconds!"
The Jedi's ship was rocked repeatedly, and the final wing was ripped away by a well-placed plasma shot.
"Four seconds!"
"Missiles, break hard to port!" Zekk cried out in warning.
"Three!"
"Two frigates are trying to cut us off!"
"Two!" Several control panels erupted in a shower of sparks as a missile exploded just off to the side of the fleeing freighter.
"We can't take another hit like that!"
"One! Punch it!"
The engines of what was left of the *Light* glowed brightly as the ship shot forth and away.
|* *|
"*This is Dozen Lead to the Flames of Dathomir, do you copy?"*
"Loud and clear."
"*Three has spotted the Ni'Korish battle cruiser just behind the fifth moon. We're still looking for the destroyer."*
"Maybe I can help with that," Han replied. "We'll begin our attack on the battle cruiser and hopefully draw out our wayward friend. If it doesn't show, feel free to begin your assault."
"*Understood, Dozen Leader out."*
Han gazed about the bridge of the prototype Battle Dragon, having to admit that Teneniel definitely didn't hold anything back in her construction. Given what he'd seen of its systems, he was glad the ship was one of the good guys. Nodding to the Hapan captain, he motioned to the tagged location. "Go ahead, captain, flush them out."
As the *Flames of Dathomir* maneuvered into position, an unexpected explosion sent vibrations throughout the ship.
"Report!"
The sensor operator responded professionally. "Sir, the Ni'Korish destroyer has appeared. They're emitting some sort of jamming signal."
"The battle cruiser is also coming out," warned another sensor operator.
Han signaled his comprehension with a wave, and held up his comlink. "This is the *Flames,* Kyp, which ship do you want to try for first?"
"*We'll pick off that gnat at your six, standby."*
As the Ni'Korish destroyer continued to fire on the well-shielded engines of the Battle Dragon, all the while maneuvering around what

looked to be ineffectual return fire, six X-wings swooped in. The pilots, in their mag-shielded, sealed suits, docked on various parts of the destroyer and began to make their way into the vessel.
"Captain, General Solo, two squadrons of fighters are coming from the battle cruiser, estimated time to firing range, two minutes."
"Understood." Han held up his comlink once more. "Kyp, the battle cruiser is making its move."
"*I see it."*
"*Royal Squadron will create the screen, Master Jedi,"* added the pilot in charge of the Hapan fighter squadron. *"There are only two squadrons of traitors so we should be able to make quick work of them."*
"*Much appreciated Royal Leader. We'll try to take a few of them out as well. Can't let you Hapans have all the fun."*
"*I have a feeling that when the Vong get here there will be more than enough for everyone."*
"Cut the chatter," Han said. "The battle cruiser is now in optimal firing range but hasn't opened up yet."
"Their fighters are in missile range," the sensor officer alerted. Seconds later, computers whistled alerts signifying multiple warhead locks.
"Royal Squadron, feel free to use your missiles on the enemy fighters," Han ordered. "The *Flames* and the Dozen will take care of the battle cruiser."
"*Affirmative."* The Hapan X-Wings did as commanded and multiple exhaust trails could be seen shooting out into the darkness of space.
"*Flames, Dozen Leader, this is Two, the destroyer is secure. We have seven prisoners and no casualties."*
"Understood, Two," Han acknowledged Corran's report. "When the fighting is over, we'll ship them back planet-side."
"*Royal Lead here, the remaining Ni'Korish fighters are retreating towards the battle cruiser. Royals Three and Seven are EV, requesting a pick-up."*
"Acknowledged, how many enemy fighters are left?"
"*Three or four, most of them was taken out in the missile volley."*
"General Solo! The enemy battle cruiser is on a collision course."
"What?" Han glanced out the viewport and saw the bird-of-prey like vessel streaming towards them.
"It's worse, Han," Ganner muttered.
"How can it be worse?"
"There's no one on that ship. No one organic anyways."
"You sure?"
"I just reached out to try and figure out their captain's strategy, that ship's a ghost ship."

"*Flames*, *Dozen Lead here. It looks like they had the same strategy we had in mind. I just sent Eight around and she reports that there are about four fighter squadrons and a squadron of gunboats trailing the cruiser."*
"The battle cruiser is launching all of its warheads," the sensor officer warned.
Han thumbed the communicator once more. "Royal Squadron, the rest of the Dozen, go after the fighters behind the cruiser. The *Flames* will try to disable it, but if that fails, we will be destroying it."
"*Roger."*
"*Acknowledged."*
"*This is Corran aboard the destroyer Gallinore's Pride. We have control of her systems, where do you want us?"*
"You wouldn't mind shooting down some of those warheads for us, would you?"
"*Can do."* Though the destroyer was relatively small when compared to the Battle Dragon or battle cruiser, it was specifically designed as an interdiction support vessel. The destroyer's six ion cannon batteries and eight turbolaser turrets immediately began to stitch the wave of incoming missiles with deadly energy.
As explosions blossomed between the still approaching battle cruiser and the *Flames of Dathomir*, the Ni'Korish fighter squadrons peeled off from the wake of the vessel and immediately engaged the remaining half of Kyp's Dozen as well as Royal Squadron.
"*Royal Six, one on your tail!"*
"*This is Eleven, I'm hit!"*
"*You've picked up two more, Four, break hard left!"*
"*This is Dozen Nine to Royal Five, come about point seven three then kill your engines; I'll take the first three."*
"*Much appreciated Dozen Nine!"*
"*Flames, watch it! The gunboats are setting up for an attack run!"*
"What's the status on that battle cruiser?" Han said, as the ship shook from the impact of several torpedoes.
"Still on a collision course, it corrected itself after we took evasive maneuvers."
"Flames, we can't get to the gunboats. A couple of them have broken away and are lining up for a run on your bridge."
Han groaned. "Just great. Have we got a bead on them?"
At that, the weapons officer gave a feral grin. "The ship's targeting systems have firing solutions for half our batteries."
"Then show them our upgrades."
"Yes sir. Batteries seven through seventeen, open fire."

For the ship's overall design, for all its firepower, a Battle Dragon usually only had two or three targeting computers. This was great for mass fire on one location and for large targets, but not so much for taking on individual fighters or ships that were spread out. The *Flames of Dathomir*, due to Teneniel's insistence, had one targeting system for every two guns, enabling for greater accuracy and range of fire. The approaching gunboats, which were relying on the careening battle cruiser to draw the fire of the Battle Dragon, were caught entirely unawares as over a dozen turbolaser batteries began to track their individual courses.

The gunboats quickly broke formation, trying to scatter as tree-trunk sized beams of energy rapidly lashed out towards them. Their maneuvers were to no avail, however, as the turrets proceeded to track and tear through the smaller shield generators of the attacking ships. All the while, the remaining turrets continued to work on the Ni'Korish battle cruiser, punching through armor and shields.

"A second wave of gunboats has just broken off their attack."

"Royal Squadron has reported three more casualties, one pilot EV. The Dozen also has a pilot EV."

"Battle cruiser shield strength has weakened around its engines, reroute firing power to the ion cannons."

Han watched with grim satisfaction as the blue energy crackled over the engines of the battle cruiser. After repeated volleys, the engines began to overload and flicker out. Within a matter of seconds, the battle cruiser was dead in space.

"General Solo! Detecting a buildup of energy within the battle cruiser's main reactor! It's going to self-destruct!"

"Blast it. Pull this ship out of range and tell everyone to fall back as soon as they can!"

"Orders given, but the Ni'Korish fighters and remaining gunboats aren't letting up."

"I guess we're going to have to burn the paint job a little then. Try to get between the fighters and the cruiser. Switch all power to aft shields once in position." Han activated the comlink once more. "Durron, Royal Leader, pull your people behind the *Flames* and try to keep the Ni'Korish from blowing holes in us. We'll act as your shield."

"Much obliged, General Solo."

"Roger that."

Han switched channels. "Corran, the cruiser's taking itself down, but the Ni'Korish aren't letting our fighters get clear. See if you can't help Durron and the others."

"Adjusting course."

"Battle cruiser's core at critical in thirty seconds."
"We're in position."
"Kill engines, shields full to aft."
"Gunboats lining up for another attack run. Torpedoes have been launched."
"Kyp, where's that cover?"
"The gunboats and torps are ours."
Four X-wings swooped in behind the gunboats and unloaded the last of their missiles directly into the rears of the vessels. Three of the surviving gunboats were shredded to pieces instantly, while the remaining four once again peeled away. Rather than pursue, the X-wings of Kyp's Dozen fired their lasers, rapidly cycling through their four cannons. Though the strength of the lasers was not as strong, it did not take much to detonate the volley of Battle Dragon-bound warheads.
"Torps are fried. Looks like CorSec has picked up the remaining gunboats."
"Battle cruiser core detonating in ten seconds."
"This is General Solo. Everyone brace for impact!"
Only a couple of hundred meters away from the *Flames of Dathomir*, a brilliant nova emerged from the rear of the battle cruiser. The blinding explosion continued on, engulfing the entire vessel and sending pieces of debris flying out at several times the speed of sound. The *Flames* was buffeted by the shockwave, shortly before the full force of the explosion rocked the Battle Dragon. Alarms went off all throughout the bridge as the sheer heat of the blast began to scorch the armored plates. Shrapnel, propelled by kinetic energy pierced through the magnetic-based protective shielding and left pockmarks across the entire expanse of the Battle Dragon's aft.
Fortunately, the vacuum of space ensured that the fires died out just as quickly as the explosion had begun.
"Flames, you still okay in there?'
After a quick nod from the sensor operator, Han responded. "A little toasted, but we're all still in one piece. How about you guys?"
"The remaining fighters bugged out and jumped to hyperspace. I'd estimate two gunboats and a squadron of fighters managed to get away. But other than that, we're all okay. Thanks for the cover."
"Right, we'll pick up the pilots who went EV and join up with Fel's group. At least we now know that this very expensive ship works."
"Understood."

Han ended the communications and leaned back in his chair. The Hapan captain at his side, offered him a weak smile. "That was a nice warm-up, wasn't it, General Solo?"
"We got a destroyer but lost five fighters and two pilots."
"But we also cleared the way for further contact with Fleet Captain Fel's fleet. Now the Homeguard can link up with the reinforcements if need be."
"Captain, we're facing a Yuuzhan Vong fleet on a scale very few people living have seen. Take my word for it when I say that 'need be' is an understatement."
I* *I
The trip through hyperspace was as perilous as their journey just to get there. The badly damaged freighter was shaking from the strain the faster-than-light travel was putting on it. Control panels were sparking, smoking, and all but exploding. The aging hyperspace-drive, on its first jump in over a half century, sent bone jarring vibrations through the ship, all the while whining in an unhealthy way.
Scampering through the ship, Anakin, Jaina, Tenel Ka, and Zekk frantically tried to fix what they could, but it was a losing battle.
"This ship won't make it to Hapes," Tenel Ka observed, as the weapons controls fizzled and erupted in a shower of sparks.
"I'm diverting power away from the hyperspace-drive," Jaina called out. "It'll take us longer to reach Hapes, but at least we won't explode en route."
Anakin winced as a whole row of controls suddenly died. "The navi-computer and sensors just went dark."
"Sorry, that was me," Zekk called out. "Jaina can you reroute that extra power through the secondary bypass? I had to rewire a whole bundle to keep the CO2 scrubbers from dying on us."
"We really need to start treating our ships better. This makes, what, the third vessel that's been shredded under our watch?" Jaina said glibly, before cursing as an electric current arched and burnt one of her fingers. "Anakin, how about now?"
"That did it, power's back."
"You know, whoever owned this ship last really left it in a mess," Jaina muttered, pulling herself out from under a maintenance hatch and sitting up. "I mean, personal modifications I can understand, but when you switch the power buffers with military grade hardware, you have to change *all* of the wiring too. The ones this bucket of bolts has now just can't handle the excess power."
Zekk regarded Jaina with a strange look that momentarily flustered her.

"What?"
He shook his head. "No, nothing. Just haven't heard you this upbeat in a while, let alone insult a ship. You kind of sounded like your old self."
Jaina flushed and looked away, mumbling to herself. "Definitely gotta get Jacen to finish rebuilding my head."
Vergere entered the cockpit. "Will this ship hold together?"
Jaina shrugged. "Probably, but unless she goes through a major overhaul, she won't ever fly again."
"Then it has served its purpose," Vergere replied. "I have come to inform you that your brother and the younger human female are beginning to awaken."
Tenel Ka's head snapped in Vergere's direction. "Truly?"
"You are close to him, are you not? Can you not feel him stir?"
Tenel Ka concentrated for a moment and did indeed feel Jacen slowly wake from his Force induced coma.
"The autopilot hasn't given out yet," Zekk said, checking over the controls. "I think we're safe if we all go check up on them."
They began to head towards the back of the ship when they realized that Anakin hadn't moved from the pilot's chair. Jaina cocked her head to the side. "Anakin, is everything alright?"
Anakin offered a weak smile. "Just a little tired. I'll catch up with Jacen later."
"And Tahiri?" Zekk said with a frown.
"Her too," Anakin said wearily. "Just tell her that I'm sorry."
"'Sorry'?"
"She'll know what I mean…I hope."
"If you're sure, Anakin," Jaina said, taking a hesitant step out of the cockpit.
"Go on. I just need a small break."
|* *|*
Jaina, Tenel Ka, and Zekk followed the Fosh Force-user into the back of the ship, or in other words, the cargo-bay. Apparently, sometime after Jaina had dumped the starfighter out of the hold and during their trip in hyperspace, Vergere had moved all the unconscious Jedi. Jacen, Tahiri, and Alema were stretched out on cargo-webbing made into makeshift hammocks.
When Jacen began to stir, Jaina, Tenel Ka, and Zekk quickly made their way to his side.
"Argh," Jacen groaned, a hand moving to his forehead.
"Jacen," Tenel Ka knelt next to the hammock. "How do you feel?"

Jacen swallowed several times, fighting off a wave of nausea. "Have you ever stuck your hand into a power socket, just because you were curious, and then slammed your head against the nearest wall?"
Tenel Ka quirked an eyebrow in amusement and at the same time, her shoulders relaxed. "I have not."
"Oh, well it kind of feels like that."
"I am not surprise, your body absorbed a large amount of the Force energies held by the Jedi Temple," Vergere commented mildly. "But the ill-effects should not last long. Quite the opposite, you should find yourself more attuned to the Force than before."
Jacen groaned. "That might explain the weird echoes I heard when I reached out with the Force just now."
"It could also be my thoughts," Jaina added. "I think you were still in the process of repairing my head when you woke me up."
Jacen blinked once more as he glanced at his sister. "Hope I put everything back in the right place."
"It's like a scrambled egg," Jaina deadpanned. "I guess I'm enough to be me, but the memories are all scattered."
"When we reach a safe place, I can try to help fix the rest," Jacen said apologetically. "It might even be better since I can have Ana…kin help."
An awkward silence fell over the group as Jacen realized that his younger brother was nowhere to be seen.
"It will take some time," Tenel Ka said gently. "You were…harsh, in your opinions of him."
"He's also feeling the effects of his time in the bacta tank," Zekk said. "I don't think this little misadventure was any good for his health."
Jacen forced a weak smile and reclined back into the makeshift hammock. "It seems that he and I are still having trouble seeing eye to eye."
"You just have different views of the Force," Zekk offered.
Jacen scoffed softly. "It's more than that, Zekk. My time on Coruscant has helped me see that. Anakin doesn't realize that every action has a consequence, that his recklessness has a price. He doesn't see the universe in shades of darkness or light. To him, everything is grey, with every dark action canceling out the light. The Force is little more than a tool to him."
"And you disagree?"
"I used to." Jacen said, surprising the others.
"Jacen?"
"Vergere helped me come to a realization. The Force *is* a tool to some extent, it is not inherently dark or light. It is the intention of the user

that makes it that way. It doesn't mean that I agree with Anakin completely, but I at least understand his views a little better."
"Then, maybe," Jaina hesitated. "Maybe you should tell him that. The arguments between the two of you stand out the most in my memories of recent events. If the two of you reach some sort of compromise, I think it will be better for everyone."
"Then again," Vergere interjected. "Jacen has said that he does not wholly agree with his brother's views. In Anakin's current state, it is highly like any overture on Jacen's part will be rebuffed. I would recommend that you wait, Jacen, until both you and your brother have fully recovered from your current adventures. You will be able to think clearer, after all, when rested."
Jacen regarded the Fosh Force user for a moment, then nodded. "You're right. It'll probably be better if we discuss it when our lives aren't in mortal peril. But what should I do, then? I can't help but feel that the rift between Anakin and I continues to grow."
"There is little you can do," Vergere counseled. "Time will dampen the anger and disappointment he feels. If you do not wish to cause any more aggravation, I would suggest that you stay out of his way until you reach Hapes."
Jacen frowned, but reluctantly agreed. "I guess that's okay. I don't see him seeking me out any time soon either."
Tenel Ka, who had kept her silence throughout Vergere's advice, regarded the Fosh neutrally. "Do you not think it better that Jacen and Anakin make up sooner than later? Not only are they are both highly skilled and could accomplish greater things if they work together and not apart, but they are brothers."
Vergere returned Tenel Ka's even stare with one of her own. "On Coruscant, I saw Jacen's darkest fears and greatest desires, his screams of pain and gasps of relief when the pain was lifted. *I* know full well what Jacen is capable of, perhaps more so than you. Do not question me when it comes to the mind of a Jedi, for I have known many. Jacen and Anakin are merely two more in a long line of brilliant strategists and warriors. But, for all their knowledge and power, the Jedi have always been fools when it comes to the matters of the heart. Based off his past experiences, Anakin Solo will no doubt be conflicted by the reawakening of his brother. By putting off the confrontation between the two, I am giving both time to reflect on their positions. No good will come of hastening a conflict if they will only speak insults and assumptions."
"Tenel Ka," Jacen said faintly. "It's okay."

Though Tenel Ka looked as if she wanted to say more, she simply raised an eyebrow at Jacen and nodded. The Hapan princess, soon to be queen, however, returned to staring at the enigmatic Fosh. While the others went on to check on a stirring Alema, Tenel Ka hung back and continued to observe both Vergere and Jacen. Vergere had spoken some truth in her reasoning to prevent another argument between Jacen and Anakin. Yet, at the same time the way Jacen looked to the Fosh for guidance had unnerved her slightly. Whatever had happened on Coruscant had led to Jacen trusting the mysterious woman.
But it made no sense. There was little doubt in Tenel Ka's mind that Vergere had been responsible for much of Jacen's pain on Coruscant. Why trust someone who would hurt him? Despite her confusion, there was one thing Tenel Ka was sure of. She had to get Jacen away from Vergere as soon as she could. He had already been changed greatly by his time on Coruscant, even his Force presence was different, changed by his absorbing of the Force nexus at the Jedi Temple. Despite everything, Tenel Ka could still see the Jacen she once knew. The animal-loving, fun-minded Jedi who she had grown to care for during all their adventures as children.
She only hoped that by the end of the war, she would still be able to see that part of him.
|* *|*
When the others left, Anakin closed his eyes and reached out through the Force. He had felt something in Tahiri change while she had been unconscious. Whether it was her Yuuzhan Vong personality becoming dominant or some other factor, he did not know. The only thing he knew was that the Tahiri had he grown up with was no longer.
Her Force presence was still there, but muted, different. He felt neither the usual rapid-fire, bubbly personality of his best friend, or the icy cold warrior of her Yuuzhan Vong counterpart. He didn't know what to make of it. She was there, but, she wasn't. His vision of her, scarred and laughing a laugh that chilled him to the bone, flashed through his mind. He instantly shut out that train of thought. She had promised him that it wouldn't come true. That she would never join the dark side.
"You're thinking too much." Tahiri's reproach caught him off guard and his eyes flew open.
Anakin saw her in the cockpit doorway. "Tahiri?"
"Does it really matter who I am?" Tahiri replied gently, bare feet sliding across the floor, stopping just as she passed the threshold. "I would *never* hurt you, Anakin."
Anakin watched her carefully. "The others…"

"Are busy tending to Jacen and Alema. It didn't take much to slip by them. I think Vergere saw me leave, but she didn't say anything."
An awkward silence filled the cockpit, with Anakin frozen in his seat and Tahiri standing uncertainly in the entrance. His blue eyes studied her, while she seemed hesitant to step any further into the room.
"You're different," Anakin said softly.
Tahiri used one of her hands to grip her other arm. "I am. But I am still Tahiri."
"Still my best friend, Tahiri Veila?"
Tahiri opened her mouth several times, but closed it each time. Eventually she sighed, and steeled herself for the worse. She straightened and dropped her arms to her side. "I am Tahiri Kwaad."
"Tahiri…."
"Kwaad." Tahiri unconsciously rocked backwards on her heels and looked at her feet.
Anakin was surprised to find his mouth dry and his hands tightly gripping the armrests of the chair.
"I am different," Tahiri whispered, raising her head. She waited until she had Anakin's gaze. "But I still lo…what I feel for you hasn't changed. You're still my best friend…and more…if you want."
Anakin barely caught the last part, her voice had trailed off and Tahiri's emotional barriers had risen to the point where she had almost cut him off. Almost. Her doubt and uncertainty were leaking through by the bucket loads. Just as he could never fully keep her out, no matter how hard he tried, the opposite was just as true. At least, Anakin thought wryly, that hadn't changed. Her emotions were every bit as conflicted as his were, but he could still sense the core aspects of her thoughts.
Holding her green-eyed gaze, Anakin rose from his chair and walked over to her. Green eyes widened ever so slightly, not wanting to look away from his smoky stare of the deepest of blue. Very slowly, he leaned forward until their foreheads were touching and took each of her hands into his own. She interlocked their fingers the moment he had gripped her hands, her eyes finally fluttering shut.
"You're still Tahiri," Anakin murmured.
"I promise." Tahiri swallowed. "The other Tahiri wanted Riina's strength to better protect you. Riina wanted to come out into this world. Neither could survive without the other, but they couldn't achieve their goals as long as the other was alive."
"I'm sorry I couldn't help you more."
Tahiri shook her head a fraction. "You kept my old self sane. Because of that, her feelings are my feelings."

Anakin released one of her hands and reached up to gently cup her face. His thumb brushed her cheek, and she unconsciously leaned her head into his hand.
"And the Yuuzhan Vong knowledge in your head?"
Tahiri lowered her gaze, her breath hitching slightly as a small amount of fear settled at the bottom of her stomach. "I…I still know the language, can think in it if I tried. It's as much a part of me as the old Tahiri's memories."
When Tahiri felt no disgust or fear from Anakin, her heart slowed with relief. Then, when she allowed the hand he had on her cheek to tilt her head back, and his lips hovered just above her own; her heart began racing even faster than before. Sparkling blue eyes heated her to her bare toes, despite the fact that all she was wearing was the tattered remains of the Hapan hospital gown in the cold cockpit.
Anakin smiled the roguish Solo-grin as he felt Tahiri's emotional barriers lower once more. "How would you say 'I love you' in Vong?"
She giggled softly. "There really isn't a Yuuzhan Vong equivalent, remember, the entire religion is pain-based. The closest thing a male would say to his mate kind of translates as: 'You are sufficient enough to carry on my genes.'"
Anakin gave her a brief kiss, pulling back only so that their lips were millimeters apart. "And what would a woman say?"
At that, Tahiri gave a coy smile and whispered something in Yuuzhan Vong, her breath soft against his lips. Anakin raised an eyebrow questioningly. "And that means?"
"I'll tell you, one of these days." Tahiri released his hand to pull down on his shirt, standing on her toes as she kissed him once more. This kiss was much more heated and lasted quite a bit longer.
When the two parted, they became aware of two things. One, they were blocking the doorway into the cockpit, and two, they had an audience, again.
"I guess you're okay, Tahiri." Jaina didn't try to hide her smile.
"Thanks to you and Jacen," Tahiri said without a hint of embarrassment. She rotated slightly so that she could lean back against Anakin's chest. When she didn't see the last Solo sibling, she looked to Jaina questioningly.
"He's with Vergere, helping Alema recover. Lord Nyax really did a number on her head."
"She'll be okay though?" Anakin asked, switching topics away from his brother. Though he was grateful that Jacen had helped Tahiri out, he doubted that they'd ever truly agree on the other's philosophy about

the Force, and he didn't want the tension between the two of them dragging everyone else down.
"She'll likely have a big headache," Jaina nodded. "But she'll be fine."
As soon as Jaina responded, a bank of computers sparked, hissed, before going dead.
"Well," Zekk groaned. "There goes our brief break."
"On the bright side, we'll be doing this for what, another twelve hours?" Anakin added, as everyone hastily moved back into maintenance mode.
"Can't you make a droid to fix these things for us?" Jaina pulled out a now smoldering bundle of wires.
"If this ship could afford to spare the parts," Anakin replied drolly, pounding on a console to bring it back to life.
Tahiri, watching the others scamper around, chuckled lightly. "This place is like an overturned *cha'saks* hive. Are you sure we'll be able to make it back to Hapes?"
"It would be a rather embarrassing way to go, wouldn't it?" Zekk chimed in, raising an eyebrow at Tahiri's reference. "'Heroes of the Republic and next generation of Jedi, dead because their ship flew apart in hyperspace.'"
"We'd have several generations of dead Jedi masters who won't ever let us forget it," Anakin said wryly.
"So that's a 'yes'?"
"The Force has let us get this far," Tenel Ka nodded. "It would not be very nice if it decided to kill all of us in such an inglorious way."
"That's not really filling me with a lot of confidence," Tahiri said nervously.
A small explosion sounded from somewhere in the back of the ship was coupled with Jacen's yelp. Shortly after, Jacen, a groggy-looking Alema, and Vergere stumbled into the bridge.
Jacen ran a hand through his unruly hair as he straightened. "One of the fuel cells just ruptured and vented into the cargo bay. It's a safe bet we've lost one of our engines."
Jaina worried her lower lip. "I can compensate by diverting power back into the hyperdrive, but there's a chance it might explode as well. If I don't, however, we won't be able to stay in hyperspace for much longer."
"We have no choice," Zekk said grimly, none of his previous lightheartedness now evident. "If we drop out of hyperspace now, we'll still be in Vong controlled space."
Jaina regarded the others for a moment, before nodding and flicking a couple of switches. The vibrations intensified throughout the cabin as

the hyperdrive whined in protest. Yet, the ship stayed in one piece and the aged hyperdrive didn't explode. The others released their collective breaths.
Another panel fizzled and died.
Zekk glared balefully at the panel. "This is going to be a long trip."
|* *|
"*Acting Fleet-Captain* Fel?" Han smiled in amusement as he sat in his quarters aboard the *Flames of Dathomir*.
"I thought it only prudent as I am in command of a fleet. I have received the latest situational updates and concur with your recommendations, General. I am not without my concerns, however."
"I know it's risky, splitting our fleet like that, but if we split the attention of the Vong fleet, we'll probably last a little bit longer than if we just bunch up."
"The Yuuzhan Vong are in sufficient enough numbers that there is a large chance that they will defeat one half of our fleet and turn their full attention onto the remaining half. Unlike their forces, we cannot afford to sacrifice ships and win."
"Do you have a recommendation of your own?"
"I do, it is similar to your idea, but combines it with a Chiss stratagem. It involves sending our strongest ships, flanked by our fighters, to engage the flagship of the enemy. In this case it would be the yammosk carriers and the command ship. Without either, the enemy fleet will fall into disarray."
"How will you pull that off, though? Their most vulnerable ships will most likely be at the back of their fleet?"
"If we hide our vessels in the asteroid field and within the gravity well of the outer gas giants, we can wait for their fleet to pass. The remaining vessels need only hold their ground until we destroy our targets. This has a chance of working since the Yuuzhan Vong are unaware of this portion of the Hapan fleet."
"So that means I'll be commanding the 'bait,'" Han said mildly.
"*Correct, General Solo. If we are to use this strategy, however, we only have seven hours to get into position."*
"You do realize that I will have only about a dozen capital ships and four wings of fighters under my command?"
"*I do. I will endeavor to destroy the command ship and the yammosks as swiftly as possible."*
"And if those two ships are in the middle of their fleet?"
"*Then I will count on you to finish off the rest of them,"* Jagged remarked, sounding oddly calm about the possible situation. *"We have seen it before, General. Without the yammosk, the Yuuzhan Vong fleet*

becomes disorganized, vulnerable. If we eliminate the yammosk-carrying vessels, our chances of winning are increased exponentially."
Han was about to reply when his communication's terminal beeped. "One moment, Jagged."
"*I have received a similar notification."* Jagged nodded, and ended the communication between them.
"Go ahead, bridge."
"General," Ganner said. "We have a transmission from a New Republic task force that has just arrived in system."
Han blinked. "Come again, Rhysode?"
"A Garik Loran from Wraith Squadron is attempting to contact any Hapan vessel in range."
"Wraith Squadron!" Han jumped to his feet. "Put him through."
The holo-pad hummed to life, and a miniature version of the Wraith Squadron leader flickered into view. Face looked in two different directions, a sign that he was talking to someone else. This was confirmed when he gave a brief salute to Han. *"General Solo, thanks for joining me and Acting Fleet-Captain Fel."*
"Face!"
"*You sound happy to see me."*
"You have no idea. You have any bag of tricks with you? We could really use a few."
"*How's two Imp Star Deuces, a heavy Mon Cal, and a wing and a half of fighters sound?"*
"Sounds like a good start."
"It's all we could scrounge up. This isn't an officially sanctioned New Republic strike force."
"Oh?"
"It's still in line with Wraith Squadron's charter though: Doing whatever it takes to keep the New Republic safe."
"Since when did Wraith Squadron become Wraith Fleet?" Han muttered, shaking his head. "Has Jagged filled you in on our situation?"
"Partially." The holographic projection wavered slightly. *"My taskforce can handle the 'appear out of nowhere and destroy the big enemy ships' part of the plan. We're better equipped for that anyways. Our recent scouting reports of the enemy fleet place those VIP ships at the center of the fleet and our Mon Cal and Imp Deuces can take more heat than your Battle Dragons."*
Han regarded the Wraith commander. "Doing the impossible again?"
"You know Wraith Squadron."
"To increase their chances of survival, I was thinking of adding a third phase of the plan." Jagged spoke up. *"General Solo, your forces can*

maintain their position between the enemy fleet and Hapes. My forces will flank them, jumping into the system on your signal."
"That will split their forces again, but it will also put Face's group in a lot more danger."
"We need every advantage we can get," Face acknowledged. *"Even with this plan, the best we can hope for is to force a withdrawal. I'll have my taskforce hide out in the asteroid belt and hope we don't get ourselves vaped. When the Vong pass by, we'll go all out. Fleet-Captain Fel can then bring his forces from behind, while your forces engage the front part of the Vong fleet."*
"It's a plan then," Han sighed.
"I know how you feel, Han." Face said sympathetically.
"May the Force be with you, Face, Captain Fel."
"You as well, General Solo." Jagged snapped to attention and saluted.
"Make sure you survive this, Han, you owe me another drink."
"I heard Wraith Squadron has a habit of buying people entire breweries," Han chuckled. "We make it through this, I'll get you one on any planet you choose."
"See you after the dust settles," Face gave a more lopsided salute as he too stepped away.
With the transmissions ended, Han sat in silence for several seconds. Worry for Anakin, Jaina, and Jacen gnawed at him like never before. Pushing the Vong fleet back, however, was the only thing he could do at the moment. Not that he liked it. He was getting too old for galaxy-changing space battles.
Letting out one last breath, Han made his way to the bridge, nodding to the Hapan captain.
"Captain, move the fleet to the following coordinates. This is it."
I* Chapter End *I
A/N: To start things off, Happy New Year to all!
Darksabre, you rock, I definitely look forward to your reviews every time I post a chapter. Thanks for your continuing support and I'm glad you're enjoying this story so much. Okay, now that that's out of my system...
There is only one and half chapters (about 16,000 words) left for my version of the Dark Journey, the other half is kind of an intermission of sorts before we begin with the Rebel Dream/Stand and a whole bunch more fun. Expect some charcters to join the story and others to take a step back. Some characters even get a larger role than they did in canon. Old friends return, and more things go boom. And yes, I jettisoned the other Anakin's Delta-7b in this chapter. Anyways, next update is next week where I more or less wrap up the Dark Journey

storyline in one climatic battle (pretty much how it ended in canon too).
21/7/12: edited for minor wording, grammar, and spelling errors.

ADA 9

Nine
***I**I**
They exploded out of hyperspace in a shower of sparks and debris, as what was left of their G9 Rigger-class freighter nearly flew apart from the deceleration. The occupants inside were thrown left and right as the battered ship careened violently.
"Inertial dampeners failing!" Alema called out, just before she was thrown onto the control panels.
"We're losing our last engine!" Anakin added.
"What? Power output is still stable." Zekk glanced over his shoulder at the youngest Solo.
"No!" Anakin yelled over the myriad of alarms blaring through the cockpit. He motioned to the aft of the ship. "We're actually losing our last engine!"
Zekk and the others heard the groaning of overstressed metal, as well as a series of small explosions erupt from the back of the ship.
Alema, clutching her bruised forehead, swore. "Oh, Sithspit."
A second later, their last engine tore free from its casing. Fortunately it spiraled out away from the ship. Unfortunately, a second after that, the liberated engine detonated in a fiery blue blaze, the shockwave rocking the G9 Rigger freighter and sending it in an uncontrolled tumble.
The young Jedi within the ship, as well as the older Fosh Force-user were unceremoniously bounced about. The ship's aging and damaged stabilizers attempted to compensate, but without a drive core and engines, it had nothing to use to reverse the momentum.
Bits and pieces of the ship continued to spin away, the spidery cracks in cockpit window growing dangerously.
"On the bright side," Tahiri tried optimistically as the sight of a familiar planet momentarily flitted by the window. "We did make it back to Hapes."
"Downside," Anakin said from his position next to her. "We're probably going to either burn up in its atmosphere or create a new crater."
Tahiri glanced at her best friend, an eyebrow raised. "Are you allergic to positive thinking, Solo?"
The ship rocked again, sending the both of them flying through the cockpit and colliding with Jacen.

"I *am* thinking positive," Anakin gasped, catching his breath. "If we make a crater, they can name it after us."
Jacen weakly rolled out from beneath them and shook his head. "The Solo-Zekk-Rar-Djo Memorial Crater just doesn't have a good ring to it."
"Now who's being negative?" Tahiri groaned. "That negatude definitely has to be genetic."
The ship vibrated again, and the occupants realized that the ship was no longer moving. Gingerly, they picked themselves off the floor and bulkheads, moving to the few functional consoles.
"We're in a tractor beam," Jaina announced.
"I've got the comm-systems functioning again." Jacen flicked a few more switches.
Crackling through damaged speakers, the young Jedi could just make out an incoming message.
"Repeat, this is the Pulsar Skate, do you read?"
"Can we respond?" Jaina asked her twin.
Jacen nodded. "Not sure how long the system will hold up for."
Jaina moved into her brother's seat and activated the comlink. "This is Jaina Solo of the freighter the *Light*. We copy."
"Jaina? This is Mirax, the Lady Luck and the Skate have you in our tractors. Is everyone okay in there?"
"Bumped, bruised, and in need of a really good sleep, but otherwise just fine."
"That sleep is going to have to wait. Our force will be engaging the Vong fleet in another hour. We'll set you down at the palace and they can tell you more, Pulsar Skate out."
Jaina closed the channel and exhaled. She glanced towards Anakin, smiling faintly. "Well, looks like another one of your insane plans has worked, Little Brother. We're back, all of us are alive, and we've rescued Jacen."
"Remember that when mom and dad try to ground me for the rest of my life?" Anakin said hopefully.
Both Jaina and Jacen shook their heads with amusement. "Suicidal missions aren't good for your health. If you're grounded, at least we'll be able to stop worrying about *you*."
Jacen agreed with his sister. "Let others be the heroes once and a while. The last thing Jaya or I want is for you to get a big head."
"It's too late for that," Tahiri said mournfully, patting Anakin playfully on his head. "Don't worry though, Anakin, we can still be best friends."
"Great," Alema perked up. "If you two are only best friends, then I can be his…"

"Press-Secretary," Tahiri cut her off with false brightness. "And you can go to the far side of the galaxy and let everyone there know what a great guy Anakin is."
Alema shook her head in surrender. "I liked the old Tahiri better."
The group was still riding on the high that came with successfully finishing a suicide-mission, when the *Pulsar Skate* and *Lady Luck* gently deposited them onto one of the landing pads of the Hapan palace. There was one small drawback, however. The heat from the re-entry had fused the bulkheads together, effectively sealing them into the bridge. While the young Jedi continued to trade good-natured barbs at each other, a team of mechanics from the palace began to cut into the vessel.
There must have been some sense of urgency, because in record time, the mechanics removed an entire section of bulkhead.
Blinking as they stepped out into the day light, the young Jedi were actually surprised by the audience that was there to greet them.
"Mother?" Tenel Ka's tired grey eyes reflected some amount of surprise at the sight of the Queen Mother.
"Tenel Ka," Teneniel greeted in turn, stopping in front of her daughter. "It is good that you have returned safely."
Taking note of the lack of emotion, Tenel Ka straightened. "The situation is grim."
"Indeed, the odds are against us."
Before any more could be said, a small scuffle had broken out.
"Phagh! Yuth Ugg! Leave him alone!"
"Tahiri, wait!"
Several of the burlier of Teneniel's Royal Guard were in the process of apprehending Anakin, and Tahiri wasn't exactly appreciative of the fact. When a stun baton was jabbed into Anakin's back to force him to his knees, three guards, who probably out-weighted Tahiri many times over, were promptly sent flying.
Guns were raised, and immediately the other Jedi activated their lightsabers.
"Hold!" Teneniel ordered.
A tense silence filled the air.
Teneniel made a motion, and the guards lowered their weapons. "I understand your desire to defend your friend. But, he is still a criminal according to Hapan law."
"Mother!"
"He is still a criminal," Teneniel repeated. "Complicit in the deaths of many, and now guilty of escaping prison."
"You can't be serious!" Jaina said tersely.

"I am, Jaina Solo. Just because there is a Yuuzhan Vong fleet approaching Hapes, does not mean that laws can be forsaken."
"Look, we've come a long way and I have no patience for…"
"Jaina," Tenel Ka cut off Jaina's protests.
"Tenel Ka?" Jacen raised an eyebrow questioningly, placing one of his hands on his twin to calm her.
Teneniel regarded her daughter evenly. "Though I did not wish this for you, you know what must be done."
"Yes, mother." Tenel Ka knelt in front of Teneniel.
"Then, do you swear to uphold the values on which the House of Hapes has been founded on? To protect your people and always put their interests before that of any other? Tenel Ka Djo, my daughter, do you agree to take on the title of Queen Mother and all the responsibilities that that title contains?"
"Yes."
"Then rise, my daughter, Queen Mother of Hapes, and let all here bear witness to the next leader of the Hapes Consortium."
As Tenel Ka rose, the Hapan Royal Guard all dropped to one knee and clasped a hand over their chest. Tenel Ka's friends seemed dumbstruck by the turn of events and dropped to one knee almost automatically. Whatever words Tenel Ka was going to say were halted when the new Queen Mother saw that even Teneniel was kneeling.
"Mother," Tenel Ka said faintly.
"Queen Mother, what will be your first order?" Teneniel prompted.
Even though she knew it wasn't a dream, Tenel Ka still needed another moment to realize what she had just done. She mentally squashed the tide of doubts and worries that threatened to make an appearance and glanced at the kneeling group with some amount of trepidation. Finally, she swallowed and nodded once.
"Rise, my subjects, my friends. My first order will be to pardon Anakin Solo of all crimes. Not only did he put himself at great personal risk to rescue myself, we will need someone of his capabilities to help defend Hapes."
At her words, the guards stepped away from Anakin.
"Now, we have the matter of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet to deal with. Will someone inform me of the current situation?"
|* *|
Though Han Solo had had his full focus on the massive Yuuzhan Vong fleet looming in the distance, no one on the bridge had missed the bright flash of light that had been the *Light*'s emergence into the system. Completely bewildered at the out-of-control re-entry and the trail of debris the stricken craft had left behind, Han's first fears were

that it was some sort of missile launched by the Vong or their Peace Brigade allies. The possibility that his children were on it hadn't even crossed his mind.
"Sithspit!" Han yelled. "Sensors, are we tracking that!"
"Yes, sir! It's on a direct course for Hapes."
"Get me a weapon's solution now! The last thing we need is for the Vong to hit Hapes with one of their bio-weapons! If it gets out of range, let Lando and Mirax know that they have incoming!"
There was a flurry of action on the bridge as communications officers and weapons controllers relayed information with frantic haste. Yuuzhan Vong bio-weapons never resulted in anything positive, which is why they were called 'weapons' in the first place.
Han glanced towards his Jedi counterpart. "Ganner, can you slow that thing down?"
Rhysode reached out with the Force, then practically fell over in surprise. "No *kriffing* way!"
"Ganner!"
"Han, General Solo, Anakin and the others are on that thing!"
At that, the entire bridge fell silent.
"Ganner?"
"Anakin, Jaina, Zekk, they're all on it."
Han's heart skipped a bit, and he very slowly rose from the captain's chair. "'Anakin, Jaina, Zekk.'" Han repeated faintly. "Who else falls into that 'they're all' category, Rhysode?"
Ganner grinned broadly. "Tenel Ka, Tahiri, Alema, aaaand Jacen"
"Jacen," Han found himself smiling for the first time in a long while. "You mean to tell me that *all* of my kids are on that thing?"
"Yup."
Shaking his head, Han threw up his hands in disbelief. "I swear those kids are going to be the death of me. Weapons, stand down. Let the *Skate* and *Luck* know what's headed their way."
"Aye, aye."
"Sir, the Yuuzhan Vong fleet is clearing the asteroid field."
Han couldn't help but roll his eyes in annoyance. "I guess the family reunion will have to wait. Time until firing range?"
"One hour, twenty three minutes, sir."
"Are both Captain Fel's and Face's groups ready?"
"At last communique, yes. Face's group indicated that they were going to run silent, while the nebula is blocking sensor readings of Captain Fel's group."
"That was expected. Can our sensors tag any Vong VIP vessels?"

"Yes sir, there are three vessels whose profiles match that of a yammosk-controller. They are all stationed around a cluster of five capital ships. Analysis suggests that one of those ships is the Yuuzhan Vong flag."
"Three yammosk ships?"
"Yes, sir."
"Not good, we're going to need to get their undivided attention, then."
"Sir?" The Hapan captain looked to Han in confusion.
"Three yammosks means that they can effectively divide their fleet into three parts and still maintain control. If the Vong even get a hint that something is off, they can break formation and take three separate paths to Hapes. Until Face's crew takes them out, we need to make sure that the Vong think we're the only ones defending Hapes."
"What do you recommend, General Solo?"
"You're not going to like it."
"General, I am in Hapes' most advanced warship, taking orders from a foreign male, staring down an enemy fleet several times the size of our own, with only us standing between them and Hapes and the Queen Mother. I do not think I could despise the situation any further than I already am."
Han gave the captain a roguish smirk. "Then you won't mind a few scratches on your 'most advanced warship'?"
"I am sure you will compensate the Queen Mother accordingly."
"That's the spirit," Han waved at the bridge crew. "Signal our fleet to begin a slow advance. Hold positions just outside of firing range and open fire as soon as we have firing solutions. Have our fighters wait for the Vong to come to us."
"We will not last long against the full Yuuzhan Vong fleet."
"Then let's hope Jagged and Face do their part."
|* *|*
Teneniel Djo, former Queen Mother of Hapes, finished her report emotionlessly, remaining on one knee before her daughter. Though she would not say or show it, she was more than proud of the way Tenel Ka immediately took command of the situation, showing none of the fear that one might feel when thrown up against impossible odds.
"We will need every ship not transporting refugees to assist us," Tenel Ka said smoothly looking to some of the men gathered. "Freighters, ships that were to be scrapped, we can convert those into shields or bombs to aide our fleets."
"Yes, your highness." They clasped their fist to their chest and swiftly moved to obey.

"Tenel Ka," Jaina spoke out. "I can take the *Trickster* out. Hopefully it will give the Vong something else to worry about."
"Do so."
"Need someone who speaks and thinks in Yuuzhan Vong?" Tahiri offered.
"That'd help…"
"What?"
"I just realized it, we left those two Shamed Ones on board, didn't we?"
"They should be fine," Tahiri shrugged. "Nom Anor's ship had several months of provisions. Unless the Hapans decided to board the ship, they'll still be there."
Teneniel spoke up. "We have left the ship unmolested. It is on the docking pad where you landed."
"Great. Then, Tenel Ka, by your leave."
Tenel Ka arched an eyebrow of amusement at her friend's formal request for permission. "Go."
Jaina and Tahiri quickly darted into the palace. Once gone, Tenel Ka redirected her gaze to her mother. "Mother, I will leave further planning to you. I will be taking the *Rock Dragon* to help lead our people in battle."
Teneniel inclined her head. "As you command."
"Zekk, I could use a co-pilot. If you are not too tired."
"Plenty of time to sleep later, your highness."
"And Jacen, since I will be busy helping to coordinate the fleet, I would have you come with me to maintain the Jedi meld."
Now it was Jacen's turn to raise an eyebrow. "As you command."
"I will accompany you," Vergere interjected. "My time with the Yuuzhan Vong may help you in the fight that is to come."
"That would help," Jacen agreed, speaking before anyone else could voice an opinion otherwise.
Tenel Ka pursed her lips, but moved on. "Anakin, Alema, please assist my technicians in programming the ships we will be pressing into duty."
"What?" Alema got to her feet. "Tenel Ka you…"
"Alema, your main goal will be to protect Anakin," Tenel Ka said, her tone brokering no argument. "There will be those who will not appreciate my pardon of Anakin and will no doubt attempt to take matters into their own hands. Should you succeed in your task, the ships Anakin will be programming will kill many Yuuzhan Vong."
Alema blinked, Anakin appeared as if he was going to fall over at any moment. "Wouldn't it be better if Anakin got some rest first?"
"Alema, I'll be fine."

"As fine as a Hutt on a diet," Alema retorted dryly.
"Anakin, it's up to you," Jacen said softly. "If you join the meld, the others can help keep you on your feet."
"Tahiri will kill you if you do that, Jacen," Zekk pointed out.
"Like I said, it's up to Anakin," Jacen repeated. He hoped that this gesture would help start the healing between the two of them.
Anakin regarded Jacen expressionlessly, then nodded slowly. "Let's do it then. Like Zekk said earlier, we'll have more time to sleep later."
Tenel Ka motioned to several of her people. "Escort Jedi's Anakin and Alema to the hanger bay. They are to be protected should anyone wish to harm them."
Though the guards did not look happy, they too saluted and moved to obey.
"Hey Jacen," Anakin said, stopping in his tracks but not turning around.
"Anakin?"
"May the Force be with you."
"You too."
I* *I
Garik 'The Face' Loran shifted in the cockpit of his X-wing, doing his best to avoid looking outside. The plan his group was supposed to carry out was a risky one. Four squadrons of X-wings, and four squadrons of bombers—three Y-wing squadrons and one B-wing—were currently powered down and attached to the various asteroids in the vast field. The plan was for the fighters to draw the attention of the Vong ships so the bombers and their own capital ships could take out the command and control center of the massive fleet. But, if the Vong opened fire on the asteroid field before they could get clear, they were all in trouble.
The asteroid his X-wing had affixed itself to happened to enjoy spiraling at a rapid pace, causing the universe to repeatedly flash by his cockpit. A greater man would be immune to the motion sickness caused by the repeated spinning. Unfortunately, Face was still looking for that man so that they could trade places.
A hyper-com transmission from one of the three capital ships supporting the fighter squadrons crackled softly. *"This is the Ru Murleen, Vong fleet is passing your position. Passive scans show three squawkers, one head. Hapan Fleet One is moving forwards, looks like they're trying to distract them from noticing us. That's nice of Solo."*
Face clicked once to acknowledge, and long seconds rolled by. He felt his mouth dry up. In all the missions he had been on thus far, he was pretty sure this topped the list as one of the more nerve wracking.

Clinging to an asteroid and watching massive alien capital ships breeze by would unsettle anyone.
"*Fighter group, stand-by to engage."*
A literal sheet of enemy fighters, gunships, and various attack craft coasted alongside the larger vessels. The Yuuzhan Vong fleet seemed to be in no rush to meet Solo's challenge. Not that they needed to be, Face surmised wryly, comparing Solo's fleet to the Vong fleet was like comparing a gundark and a krayt dragon. Brief flashes of light darted from the wide formation as Solo's long-range batteries peppered the front of the Vong fleet with darts of green, red, and blue. Void defenses, however, held.
The krayt dragon that was the Yuuzhan Vong fleet roared in annoyance and a task group began to break off to deal with the Hapan fleet. It was in that moment that the order to attack blared through Face's fighter's comm-system.
"*Fighter squadrons, engage, engage, engage!"*
Face flipped a switch and his fighter hummed to life. "This is Wraith Leader to Diner, Ducky, and Silly Squadrons, time to become targets and give Solo a break."
The usual squadrons from the *Ru Murleen* and *Death Stroke* had been broken up due to the volunteer nature of the mission, and the squadrons had been reformed and renamed. Only the newly named Diner Squadron had retained its entire group of twelve pilots, though they had changed their name to fit in with the others. Certain Wraith Squadron pilots had recommended the new names as a joke, and since it was a Wraith squadron operation, the names stuck—much to Face's dismay.
"*The Vong have detected us,"* Bhindi called out. *"Picking up…a whole lot of contacts."*
"Stick with your wingmen, peoples," Face saw three coralskippers veer towards his direction.
"*And concentrate your fire on anyone that looks important,"* Kell Tainer added glibly, but Face could hear the tension in the big man's otherwise good natured comment.
It wasn't all that surprising considering the number of plasma and magma projectiles whizzing through space. Several X-wings were torn apart before the pilots had even realized what had hit them, and an unfortunate member of Ducky Squadron was vaporized when the asteroid he had been behind exploded in a hail of fighter-sized shrapnel.
"*Ducky Three, five are coming about on your six!"*

"*Like I can do anything about that Seven! Can you pick off a few? I'm trying to keep Ducky One and Two from becoming space dust!*"
"*Silly Leader to Diner Leader, that last shot blew out my port S-foils, I am in an uncontrolled spin...ejection not...take over!*"
"*Watch it, grutchin have been released.*"
Face grimaced as he sent his snub-fighter tumbling through a volley of missiles, metallic pings and blaring alarms unnecessarily reminding him that X-wings weren't designed to deflect molten slag.
"Ton-Ton!" Face called out to his artoo unit. "Shut off the alarms and take us on a random course back towards the asteroid field!"
One of the coralskippers pursuing him exploded as ruby-red laser superheated the coral. Kell Tainer's voice called out over the com.
"Wraith Lead, I took out one of yours, wanna take out one of mine?"
As Kell flew past, Face could only blink at the six fighters coralskippers that zoomed in after him. Juking once more, Face avoided another volley of missiles, then got in close behind one of Kell's pursuers. The coralskipper began to peel away, but Face unleashed a missile at point-blank range. The rear of the alien snub-fighter exploded, and the burnt out husk of the fighter tumbled aimlessly back into the asteroid field.
"Wraith Five, we're even."
Kell responded by looping around, pulling his pursuit with him, and blasting apart the second of three fighters that had been following Face.
"Not anymore. You take out the rest on my tail and I'll be really, really, really grateful!"
Two more X-wings swooped in and unleashed their own barrage, detonating one coralskipper with their combined strength, before breaking off to evade their own pursuers.
"Tainer." Face couldn't help but sigh in relief at the sound of Dia's voice as it came over the Wraith Squadron's communication channel. At least she was still alive and kicking. *"You now owe Piggy and I a favor."*
"I saved your boyfriend, does that count?"
"Contrary to what some people think, I do not believe the commander and I are in a relationship," Piggy answered. *"If we are, then I missed the..."*
"This is Wraith Four, I'm hit!" Rani D'ne's panicked cry caused the other members of Wraith Squadron to frantically search for her fighter.
"Rani," Face blasted a coralskipper and avoided two more. "Where are you?"

"It's no good Wraith Lead." The resigned tone in her voice caused Face to tightly grip his fighter's steering column. *"It's been fun. For the first time in my life, I had a place to call ho...."*
Off to the side a blinding explosion engulfed the area that had once contained Wraith Four's X-wing. An entire squadron of coralskippers was in the process of veering away, breaking off to hunt for other targets.
"*Those bastards,"* Dia snarled. *"Piggy, you're my wing, lets burn a few for Rani."*
"*I have your wing."* Piggy's voice was likewise tinged with anger, albeit more controlled than his wingman.
"*Face,"* Kell contacted the Wraith Squadron leader over a private channel. *"Those bombers better begin their attack run soon, all of Diner Squadron's gone and so are most of Silly and Ducky Squadrons. There's too many of them and not enough of us."*
Face swallowed, automatically avoiding a plasma burst and slipping behind his would-be attacker. He switched comm-channels as he stitched the back of the coralskipper with his lasers. "Wraith Leader to Bomber Boys, ETA?"
"*Wraith Leader, this is Big-Boom leader, we have targeting solutions and are starting our attack runs now."*
"We'll try to keep the lanes open as long as possible." Face was forced to abandon his pursuit as more coralskippers flooded the area. "Fighter squadrons, this is Wraith Lead, bombers and the trip-caps are on the way. Hold on for a few more seconds!"
An explosion off his starboard side caused his entire fighter to shudder and the rear of his fighter to make a very unhealthy noise. Face was fairly certain that the burnt out X-wing part that floated by his cockpit was pretty high up there in terms of importance. A guess that was confirmed when his entire fighter went dark a second later. Out of the fight and hoping that the Vong saw his fighter as debris, Face could only helplessly watch the rest of the battle unfold.
|* *|
Acting Fleet-Captain Jagged Fel stood with his arms folded in front of him, looking out of the bridge of the Hapan Battle Dragon, *Royal Judgment.* Before him swirled a never-ending stream of golden colored particles and dust, swept up by the solar winds. His fleet, the largest of the three defending Hapes, was stationed within the bright nebula a single jump away from the Hapan system. The entire fleet was ready to jump on a moment's notice, but until then, they were unaware of how the others were faring.

As the Vong fleet crossed the asteroid belt, it was his fleet's duty to jump in system and attack the rear vanguard, throwing the enemy into further chaos. Hopefully, with the New Republic task force neutralizing the clusterships, the Vong would flee in panic or launch unorganized attacks that would further limit their number.
Then again, it was entirely possible that Han Solo and the others had been defeated before they could even give the word. That they would return to a graveyard and a burning planet was not a pleasant thought.
His thoughts strayed to the Solo's daughter, Jaina. At least she would be far away from it all. Albeit, she'd be on the Yuuzhan Vong-controlled Coruscant, searching for her brother. But, it was still safer there than in the Hapes System.
"Signal has been given, Captain Fel. Both Hapan Fleet One and Republic One have engaged"
"Bring the fleet into position. And jump when ready."
For a couple of seconds, the bridge was filled with the cyclonic blue glow of hyperspace. The dazzling display rapidly gave way to normal space as they emerged on the far edge of the system.
"Bring us into attack range," Jagged ordered and thumbed the com-line open. "Shawnkyr, report in."
His Chiss squad-mate responded promptly. *"All fighter squadrons standing by and are ready to engage."*
"Permission to engage granted."
"Orders received."
Jagged watched as the Clawcraft flight of fighters darted forward, leading a majority of his fleet's portion of snubfighters. The capital ships were not far behind, barreling straight towards the rear of the Vong fleet.
"Detecting slave transports and supply vessels, only a light guard."
"The fighters can handle them," Jagged replied. "Shawnkyr, disable the slave transports if you can. The first group of enemies is yours. We will take anyone coming to reinforce them."
"Blue Flight Lead copies."
The few light cruisers and gunboats the Yuuzhan Vong had left to protect the rear were soon lit up by the repeated explosions of several dozen warheads. Caught off guard, the first Vong casualties hadn't even realized what had hit them.
Two squadrons of fighters made a run on a Yuuzhan Vong dreadnaught, unloading torpedoes directly into its engines and bridge equivalents. The twin barrage caused explosions on either end of the ship, buckling the middle, before the entire dreadnaught was ripped apart by one final blast.

Though there were several squadrons of coralskippers in the back, the Yuuzhan Vong ethos of placing the more accomplished warriors on the front lines meant that these snub-fighters were piloted by warriors who had either been disgraced or were not so talented.
Clawcrafts, X-wings, and A-wings mercilessly tore apart the Yuuzhan Vong fighter support, before looping around to begin attack runs on the dovin basal of the slave transports.
"Captain, some of the transports are venting their cargo holds!"
Jagged showed no emotion as tiny figures tumbled to their deaths in the cold vacuum of space. "We have no reason to preserve those ships then."
The order was given, and the fast-fire laser batteries onboard his Battle Dragon efficiently tore apart the defenseless ships.
"Counting numerous cruisers and fighters reversing course," warned the sensor operator. "Firing range in thirty seconds."
"Shawnkyr, reform your lines behind our ships. Do not engage the reinforcements. Repeat, do *not* engage."
"*Understood. All fighter squadrons form up and follow Blue Flight."*
The beginning skirmish appeared insignificant by the size of the force that had turned around to meet them. The Yuuzhan Vong had opted to go over and under the asteroid field, slowing their advance. Yet, with the size of their fleet, no amount of time would have helped the Hapans. Now, approaching like a swarm of locust from both above and below the asteroid belt, angry Yuuzhan Vong vessels poured into the secondary battlefield.
The *Royal Judgment* shook as the opening volleys tested the reinforced shields and armor plating. Jagged remained standing. "Concentrate all fire on the lead vessel, laser and ion batteries only.
An ocean of red and blue plowed into the Yuuzhan Vong battleship with merciless force. At first the vessel's barriers held, but then they were overwhelmed and the ship was blown apart. Through the battleship's dying wreck, an endless swarm of coralskippers roared forth, guns blazing. Three corvettes from above also opened fire, peppering the Hapan fleet with molten projectiles.
"Assign targets and fire at will. Fighter squadrons, engage!"
"The Yuuzhan Vong attack is still organized. Our New Republic allies have not yet destroyed all of their communication vessels."
"We will hold out," Jagged said firmly.
An explosion rocked the lower disc of his ship and alarms began to blare.
"That was a boarding pod!"
"Get security teams into position."

The ship rocked twice more.
"Sir, one of the larger Yuuzhan Vong ships is launching those pods."
The vessel in question was slightly larger than a Yuuzhan Vong battleship, and completely covered in pod-like bumps all across its oval-shaped form. One of the pods was suddenly propelled towards another one of the ships in Jagged's fleet at blinding speeds. It bypassed the shields and embedded itself into the side of the hull.
"This is a new tactic," Jagged frowned. "Have the *Rainbows of Gallinore* and *Blue Gem* focus their fire on that ship."
"Report from the security teams, the Yuuzhan Vong are breaking through."
Jagged nodded in acknowledgment and pulled his side-arm. "XO, you have the bridge. You four, come with me."
"Sir."
"Sir."
"How many pods are we dealing with?"
"We've been hit by three, sir. Security teams on deck eight, section five are in need of assistance."
"Inform them that help is on the way."
|* *|
High Priest for Yun-Yammka, Naazar, was not a happy man. His frown became even more pronounced when he saw the second of his three yammosk-carrying ships fall prey to a volley of missiles. The infidel attack force that had struck from the asteroids had been an unexpected surprise. The fools had to have known that they were consigning themselves to death. Even then, they still attacked.
Much of the ambushing fleet had already paid for their transgressions. One of their triangle capital-ships was already in ruins, its remains being churned up by the asteroids. The other triangle ship had gouts of flame erupting from all over, and half of its bridge-tower was gone. Yet, they continued to attack. The strongest of their three capital ships continued to lay waste to Yun-Yammka's finest, while the surviving fighters and bombers began strafing runs on the last clustership.
"Order the *Eternal Crèche* to withdraw," Naazar said tersely. "Have all our vessels concentrate fire on the last of the infidel's capital ships. They will regret their course of action."
"Your Eminence, the last capital ship has changed course. They are headed directly towards us." The warrior seemed completely surprised that the infidels would dare attack the flagship of Yun-Yammka.
"We do not need to respond to its blasphemy. Continue to shield the *Eternal Crèche* with our own vessel. Have the *yorik-et* finish off the

infidel's own fighters. Inform the pilots that they will be rewarded for every enemy they destroy."
"Yes, Your Eminence."
Naazar fell silent, observing the sensor grid. The tiny infidel fleet that had been in their way was now falling back, their number greatly reduced. They did not concern him.
"Tell Khadal to press his attack, push the infidels all the way back to Hapes."
"It will be done."
"And what word from those under attack from the infidels at our rear?"
The officer in charge of communications relayed the question, then glanced up hesitantly.
"I will not execute you for bad news," Naazar said mildly.
"Sir, the group that was sent to deal with them has been destroyed. Everyone, including the Yammka V'alh has been crushed."
"And the infidel fleet?"
"They continue to advance."
Almost as if it was accentuating the bad news, one of the infidel's missiles broke through his ship's defenses.
"Gather the rest of the fleet the moment they clear the asteroid field, we will await this new threat here. They will not be allowed to join up with the others."
"You would allow Khadal the glory of taking Hapes?" A junior officer blinked.
"I will allow Khadal the honor of slicing the tender underbelly, while we destroy the teeth of the beast of Hapes." Naazar corrected mildly.
"Anyone can kill unarmed civilians, but it takes a true warrior, a true follower of Yun-Yammka, to defeat an enemy in combat."
"But the *Jeedai."*
"Do you really think that the *Jeedai* will be cowering in fear on that planet?" Naazar glanced over to the junior officer. "They are not the type to use others as their shield. No, they will come to us."
The ship shook once more as the oval-shaped Republic cruiser continued to aim for Naazar's ship.
"Why is that ship not dead yet?" Naazar spun on another group of officers.
"Its shields are strong, your Eminence."
"Your Eminence, if the infidel ship keeps its current course, we will be forced to drop our protection of the yammosk."
"Then ensure that it cannot keep its current course, release the *zahl'o yuno."* Naazar said calmly.

The order was passed on, and a wave of highly volatile *yorik-et*, bred especially for the explosion they caused upon impact, disembarked from Naazar's command ship. The snubfighters were the 'breath of the gods,' unique to the fleet of Yun-Yammka, and its pilots pledged to die for their god, for the good of the Yuuzhan Vong people.
The infidel capital ship no longer had any fighter support, the few enemy fighters that did survive were no threat. The *zalh'o yuno* were then the perfect weapon against such a large vessel.
The first of the fighters approached the large ship, weaving and dodging around the anti-fighter laser defenses. Obviously expecting them to peel off, the gunners onboard attempt to fill the area ahead of the fighter with deadly energy. The *yorik-et*, however, made no such move, instead accelerating as it grew closer. A blink of an eye later, and a massive flare of energy appeared where the quad-laser turret had been. Both the Yuuzhan Vong snubfighter and the gun were no more.
More gouts of energy erupted all across the infidel capital ship as the suicide fighters drove their vehicles into vital points of the ship. A pair of *yorik-et* rammed themselves into the engines of the ship, and two of the bright blue lights being emitted immediately sputtered out.
The rest of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet continued to pour fire into the damaged areas, causing secondary and tertiary explosions. Parts of the hull buckled, the bridge was little more than a flaming wreck after three of the *zahl'o yuno* coralskippers slammed into it in quick succession. Its guns were dying one after another, another engine fell victim to a suicide run.
Yet, the ship continued its course. The remaining engines seemed to glow even brighter.
"Your Eminence, it is activating its hyperdrive!"
"Destroy that ship, now!"
"If it jumps now, it will hit us!"
"Evasive maneuvers!"
The glow around the infidel ship's engines pulsated and then, the ship was little more than a blur. Dozens of smaller ships that had been in its path were ripped apart, each collision leaving a trail of burnt out coral husks scattering in all directions. The edge of the infidel's capital ship scrapped the starboard side of Naazar's vessel, throwing everyone inside off their feet.
Before anyone could recover, the stricken capital ship detonated.
❙* *❙*
Han Solo swallowed, the smoke that filled the bridge acidic to his mouth, as the bright ball of energy that was once the *Ru Murleen*

engulfed the very center of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. He knew from the reports that most of Face's taskforce had been destroyed. Only the *Errant Venture* had managed to limp away, carrying the few fighters that had made it back to it.
Unfortunately, the fate of Face's taskforce was the least of Han's worries. Despite the main portion of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet halting at the edge of the asteroid field, a good number of vessels continued their course towards Hapes. What was left of his own fleet was currently limping back towards the planet, the Yuuzhan Vong breakaway fleet in hot pursuit.
"General Solo, we are receiving a hail from one of the Yuuzhan Vong battleships."
"Let's hear it."
"*This is Khadal Lah aboard the Stalking Shadow. I assume I address the infidel commander?"*
Han cracked a small grin. "No, I'm afraid not, I'm just the ship's janitor. The commander is much too busy to speak with you."
"*Then deliver a message to him."* Khadal seemed several seconds away from blowing a fuse. *"If he surrenders, we will spare his pathetic excuse for a fleet. If not, then you will all die."*
"Are you sure there aren't any other options?"
"There are none!"
The line went dead.
"Sir, is it wise to antagonize the enemy commander?"
"He can't make us any dead-er," Han shrugged.
"We are being hailed again, sir."
"From Lah?"
"No sir, from the…" The comm-officer's eyes widened. "The flag of the Queen Mother."
"Her Majesty is joining the battle?" Han said incredulously.
"Yes, sir. Shall I answer the hail?"
"By all means." Han watched the officer signal that a connection had been established. "Queen Mother, to what do we owe this honor?"
"It is only logical that the Queen Mother would stand in defense of her people."
Han stared at the comm-system in disbelief. "Tenel Ka?"
"I am the current Queen Mother of Hapes, yes."
"Well…" Han cocked his head and smiled faintly. "Your Majesty. We are currently withdrawing as best we can. I don't think we will be able to protect you if we engage."
"Then I will be the shortest living monarch Hapes has had." Tenel Ka's voice carried a mild hint of humor, but that humor was gone in her

next sentence. *"Do not worry, General Solo. My place is with my people. We will fight alongside them and die alongside them if we must. But I have no plans to die today."*
"Care to share those plans? We could really use them."
"Keep the lines open."
Before Han could ask Tenel Ka to clarify, a new voice boomed over the system.
"This is Jaina Solo, also known as the goddess Yun-Harla, calling all Vong. I just want to let you all know that I greatly disapprove of your actions and that if you don't leave now, I will destroy you."
"What in blazes…?" Han continued to stare at the speakers, unable to believe what he was hearing.
"Sir, it was an open broadcast. Sensors are picking up one Yuuzhan Vong frigate coming from the direction of Hapes…surrounded by a fleet of over fifty vessels."
"Fifty?"
"Yes, sir. But they appear to be mostly cargo freighters and junk vessels."
"Get me a communications link with my daughter!"
"Established."
"Jaina!"
"Hey dad."
"Jaina, I hope you know what you're doing, sweetie."
"Buying you some time. While the Vong get all steamed up, you guys regroup."
"Jaina…"
"I know what I'm doing dad. If the warriors onboard those coralskippers aren't thinking straight, they probably won't even realize that that big explosion took out the last clustership."
Han exhaled. "Alright, but you be careful."
"Will do. And dad…."
"Yes?"
"It's good to hear your voice again, I've been having one hell of a day."
"Tell me about it. May the Force be with you."
|* *|
Tahiri viewed the coldness of space through the senses of the *Trickster*. It sensed other Yuuzhan Vong ships nearby and was anxious to return to its own kind. Automatically, Tahiri began muttering a soothing song under her breath. The words came to her from the being that had once been Riina, the song, used by the Tuskens to calm their bantha. Only after the first verse did she realize what she was doing.

She cocked her head, as if she was thinking about who she now was, then shrugged and continued to sing.
[What is that song?] asked the petite follower of Yun-Shuno, the Yuuzhan Vong Shamed One, Shaeri.
[A song from the people of the desert] Tahiri said simply. *[It is sung to calm their animals.]*
[But you sing it in our tongue?]
[Will the ro'ik chuun m'arh understand another language?]
Shaeri seemed to mull the question over. *[I do not know, Blessed-of-Yun-Shuno. I am but a lowly Shamed One after all. I tended only to the grutchin.]*
[First of all, please, just call me 'Tahiri.']
[I do not deserve that honor.]
Tahiri rolled her eyes beneath the cognition hood. *[Then as the 'Blessed-of-Yun-Shuno' I command you to call me 'Tahiri']*
[Yes...Tahiri]
"Interesting conversation, Tahiri?" Jaina interrupted sensing the younger Jedi's amused annoyance.
Tahiri let out a low chuckle, seamlessly switching back to Basic. "I'm practically a divine figure to Shaeri. I'm just trying to get her to call me by my name."
[Blessed-of-Yun-Shuno] The other Shamed One, Kadat, called out. *[We will be within weapons range shortly.]*
"Just when I was getting through with one," Tahiri sighed, she reached over and stroked the villip. "You're on, Yun-Harla."
Jaina moved to the villip. "Yuuzhan Vong, you face your goddess, Yun-Harla. Continue to approach and you will all die."
"You dare blaspheme, Jaina Solo!"
"How can it be blasphemy if it's the truth?"
"I Khadal Lah will..." Jaina stroked the villip again, cutting off the Vong's tirade.
"Think that was enough?" Jaina said, settling into the co-pilot's seat.
"That'd do it," Tahiri nodded.
[Blessed-of...]
[It's just 'Tahiri!' Just, 'Tahiri,' Kadat.]
[Blessed-of-Yun-Shuno]
"It was worth a try." Jaina grinned, recognizing Tahiri's failure to convince the second Shamed One to call her by her name.
[The Yuuzhan Vong fleet has changed course. They are headed towards us.]
"Well, Jaina, you got their attention." Tahiri chirped, reaching over to activate the villip again.

"Khadal Lah, I warned you. I am Yun-Harla. I have but to give the order and people will give their lives for me." Jaina deactivated the villip and pulled out her comlink. "Alright, Tenel Ka, activate the 'program.'"
The 'program' happened to be something Anakin had cooked up for the ships that had been pressed into service. It was similar to the programming in a missile, which made it easy for Anakin to adapt; only, it activated the ship's self-destruct when it was a set distance away from a target. The ships would be guided by auto-pilot. Not that the Yuuzhan Vong needed to know about it. All the Yuuzhan Vong would see was a mass of ships on a suicide course.
Jaina watched the ghost fleet head towards the charging Yuuzhan Vong. The first few ships were heavy cargo vessels, able to take a beating. By the time the Vong had torn through them, a wave of suicide ships were upon them. Whichever warrior decided to be in the front of the formation and gain the honor of killing Jaina Solo, immediately found himself in a floating mine field.
The approaching fleet broke off in a panic, and as they did, finally realized that they were no longer receiving orders from a yammosk. This compounded their confusion. Their discipline, however, was apparent by the way they were able to reform their formations even without the 'hive mind'-like mentality provided by a yammosk.
[Does Yun-Harla have any more tricks?] Shaeri asked, round eyes staring fearfully at the very angry Vong fleet.
[Not having any tricks is one of her tricks.] Tahiri replied, her voice terse as she sent the *Trickster* into a high-speed roll.
[I do not understand.]
[If the Yuuzhan Vong of Yun-Yammka fear more tricks, they will not be so aggressive in their attacks.]
[But Yun-Harla does have more tricks?]
[Wait and see, Shaeri.] Tahiri fired off several shots at a coralskipper, the *Trickster's* plasma cannons blasting the coralskippers to shreds.
"This is Jaina to the *Rock Dragon.* Queen Mother, the field is yours." Jaina switched frequencies. "Dad, how much more time do you need?"
"How much can you give us?"
"Another ten minutes at best, I only have one trick left. It's one of Anakin's prototypes so I only have one shot."
"Ten minutes is fine, honey. Just do your part and get out of there as soon as you can."
Jaina nodded and closed the channel. "Tahiri, how sure are you about this?"
"Anakin had the basic idea correct, the Yuuzhan Vong rely on gravimetric profiles to identify vessels. If we deactivate our dovin

basal, using the planet's gravity to propel us instead, and then activate the decoy, it should take a few minutes for Khadal Lah and the others to even realize what has happened."
"Okay, head towards the nearest planet. On their next pass, make it seem like they hit something vital. Have…it was Kadat, right?"
"Yes, he's the acolyte of Yun-Ne'shel."
"Right, when we slow, have him release the escape pod with Anakin's gift. When he does, skim the planet's stratosphere and we'll take it from there."
"On it, Goddess," Tahiri said. She quickly translated Jaina's instructions to Kadat, then put the *Trickster* into a series of jukes and spins, firing its weapons all the while.
Predictably, the Yuuzhan Vong were compelled to follow, each of them wanting the honor of shooting down the blasphemer that was the Jedi Jaina Solo. Tenel Ka's *Rock Dragon* and an escort of two light corvettes stayed in the back, picking off any fighters that strayed away from the *Trickster* or began to head towards Hapes.
The ship rocked several times as weapons fire bypassed the defenses.
"If we don't do this soon, I won't have to fake being seriously damaged," Tahiri remarked wryly.
"How are we doing?"
"Well apart from having a couple squadrons of *yorik-et*, sorry, coralskippers, and seven capital ships pounding on us, just fine. We still have a little ways to go before I can dip us into the stratosphere."
Shaeri glanced at one of the diagnostic panels and began a countdown.
"Tell me again why she and the other one didn't put on the cognition hood earlier?" Jaina gripped the bulkhead as another volley blew pieces off her ship.
"It's a sacred duty only the warriors or priestly caste can carry out." Tahiri explained. "They were afraid of being smote by the gods for thinking of doing something above their station."
"Fun way to live."
"Hey, to us, we're probably just as weird. I mean, we have the Force. Something that they can't see or experience, and it's like a religion to us." Tahiri protested.
"I didn't mean it the way it came out," Jaina winced.
Tahiri accepted her apology with a nod. "We're in position now."
Jaina pulled out a remote control device and activated several buttons. "Grav-generator active. Release the escape pod and deactivate the dovin basal."
Kadat made a sound of acknowledgment.

As their propulsion and shielding systems were forced into a slumber, the gravity of the planet took over and began pulling them in. Tahiri clenched her jaw as she tried to control the angle of their descent. "Dipping into the stratosphere, hang on!"

The entire ship shuddered as they passed through the outer layers of the planet, their ship glowing from the friction. As it did, a lone pod fired off in the opposite direction, twirling uncontrollably. A second later, the many plasma and magma projectiles converged on it and blew the pod into atoms.

"Ha!" Khadal Lah called out victoriously over an open channel. *"Did I not say that the Jaina Solo was an imposter? No mere mortal can match the powers of the goddess Yun-Harla. Not even a Jeedai!"*

"Time to ruin his fun," Jaina said cheerfully, motioning to Tahiri to activate the villip.

"Khadal's probably going to die of a stroke before anything," Tahiri said, smiling.

"This is Yun-Harla calling Khadal Lah, if that was the best you can do, I am sorely disappointed in you. You know what, you're not even worth my time. Now, if some other warrior under your command was smarter and stronger than you, perhaps I would stay and fight. But until then, I will leave the Queen Mother of Hapes to deal with you."

Tahiri simply hung her head and shook it, chuckling to herself, as Khadal began a series of furious rants. After the warrior repeated an especially gruesome threat, Tahiri deactivate the villip and briefly slipped from the cognition hood. "You definitely know how to annoy a Yuuzhan Vong."

Jaina matched Tahiri's amused grin. "At least he isn't attacking Hapes anymore."

One of the Shamed Ones quickly sounded out a warning and Tahiri put the cognition hood back on. "Looks like we have company."

"How'd they find us?"

"By visual, probably. These are the followers of Yun-Yammka after all, they're better than the average warrior."

"Great, send a couple jolts of plasma at them and take us towards my dad's fleet."

"Jolts of plasma delivered," Tahiri repeated, pulling the ship up out of the planet. "Angry Yuuzhan Vong following."

"When are they not angry?" Jaina said dryly.

The explosions once again resumed all around their ship.

"Coralskippers coming in much fast this time," Tahiri said, cursing in Yuuzhan Vong when a blast wounded the *Trickster*. "There's also a Yuuzhan Vong battle cruiser trying to cut us off."

"Think it's Khadal?"
"I'd be surprised if it isn't. All the other ships in his fleet are trying to herd us in its direction."
"Fun," Jaina said dryly. "I think we've brought all the time we can, get us back to the rest of dad's fleet."
"On it."
"Queen Mother, we are pulling out, fall back to the rest of the fleet."
"Acknowledged."
"We have a problem, Jaina."
"It's about time we had one of those," Jaina said darkly.
"We won't be able to break out of this planet without getting seriously pounded. Our dovin basal was hurt in the last volley so our speed and defenses are a fraction of what they should be."Jaina winced. "Fine, take us back planet-side, we'll try to out maneuver them in atmosphere."
"Take over," Tahiri motioned to the organic-looking yoke. "I've told the *Trickster* to accept orders from you. You're a better pilot than me."
Jaina nodded grimly. "Let's hope we brought enough time."
I* *I
High Priest Naazar picked himself off the deck and glanced about the chaos on the bridge of his ship. Officers were frantically relaying and receiving information, others were running about to determine the damage. In all, panic had gripped them, driving them mad.
"Enough!" Naazar roared. "We are servants of Yun-Yammka, not some confused crècheling who doesn't know an amphistaff from a stick!"
Silence fell.
Naazar nodded once in approval, then pointed to an officer. "You, report."
"The explosion threw off our dovin basals and caused severe damage on the lower decks. Many are dead, but our ship is still functional, your Eminence."
"Good, and you," Naazar motioned to another. "What do you have to say?"
"We lost many ships due to that treacherous act. Among them, the *Eternal Crèche*."
Naazar mentally cursed, the news of the loss of the last clustership was not good. Without the yammosks, his fleet would not be able to mount an effective attack, or counter-attack. Though he still outnumbered the fleets of Hapes by many, with no way to coordinate his people, the numbers did not matter.
"What of the infidel fleet that jumped in behind us?"

"They are still on approach, our rear-guard has been completely annihilated. But, before they died, they reported inflicting heavy casualties."
"And Khadal's progress? Has he reached Hapes yet?"
The officer who had been the target of Naazar's question paled slightly. "He has not."
"Explain."
"Jaina Solo has entered the battle. She continues to claim to be Yun-Harla."
"And what does this have to do with Khadal's lack of progress?"
"He…he thought he could obtain greater honor if he captured or killed the *Jeedai*."
Naazar's face darkened. "Order him to attack Hapes now! We will miss our opportunity if he does not."
The order was sent, but the villip operator seemed reluctant to report back. "He is not accepting your orders, your Eminence."
"What!"
"He suspects that you wish the honor of capturing Jaina Solo yourself and does not want to follow your commands. He said that Hapes will still be there after Jaina Solo. But that the reverse was not certain."
"That fool!" Naazar hissed. "Helmsman, began withdrawing the fleet from this system."
"Your Eminence?"
"We have no means to control the fleet without a yammosk, our own command ship is damaged, and we have no idea if the infidels have any more plans. We are attacking their home territory, which they know more about than we. At the moments, the events are not favorable for us. There will be other days to capture the *Jeedai*. Today is not that day."
"As you command."
"And what of Khadal?"
"Let him do what he wishes with the warriors under his command. Perhaps he will still be lucky enough to capture Hapes, perhaps not. Yun-Yammka has no need for idiots."
|* *|
"Fleet-Captain Fel, the enemy fleet is withdrawing." The voice over the intercom informed.
Jagged Fel, however, had more pressing concerns. Such as the two Yuuzhan Vong warriors trying to flank him. Directly in front of him was the body of one of the security personnel, a razor bug steadily eating its way through the unfortunate man's remains. Directly behind Jagged was a similar sight, two fallen members of the security team felled by a

single razor-bug that had cut through both of them and had embedded itself in the bulkhead wall.
The lights in the room, an arboretum, were flickering on and off. Both Yuuzhan Vong warriors were stalking him from the catwalks above. Jagged's back, still sore from the tumble he had taken when one of the warriors had kicked him off said catwalk, protested as he crouched down low. At least it he wasn't dead.
Movement, and Jagged fired off his blaster. The shadow was gone before the bolts hit. One of his shots struck the wall, while another served an electrical cable, sending a live wire sparking to the ground.
More movement, and Jagged swung his blaster around. Only this time, the warrior burst out of the greenery with a yell and rapped Jagged's wrist with an amphistaff.
Jagged dropped his blaster on reflex and quickly rolled out of the way. He pulled a vibroblade and just barely avoided a foot to the face. The warrior pressed his attack, amphistaff whirling and slicing through the foliage. Jagged stumbled backwards, once again rolling to avoid a fatal strike. His roll took him right over the dead body of another member of the security team.
As well as the member's blaster rifle.
Coming out of his roll, Jagged grabbed the blaster from the corpse while the warrior continued to charge. Jagged sprung up to one knee and squeezed off several well timed shots. The first few shots struck the warrior in his vonduum crab armor, staggering him. Then, tracking upwards, the bolts struck the warrior in the throat and face.
With a surprised gurgle, the warrior was halted mid-charge and collapsed to the ground.
The moment the warrior fell, however, the second dropped down from above. Jagged let out a gasp as the warrior punched him in the gut. The human pilot was then lifted off the ground and thrown across the room, coming to a sliding halt against a planter box.
Spitting blood and wiping his mouth, Jagged quickly tried to locate the warrior. Which he found, only when he was lifted up by the back of his shirt and hurled to the near wall. Stars filled Jagged's vision, and he saw the blurry figure of the hulking warrior approach. The warrior bent down to pick Jagged up again, but Jagged kicked away the hand and scrambled backwards.
His motion nearly took him over the fallen electrical cable. In one last move of desperation, Jagged gripped the sparking cable and thrust it forward, just as the Yuuzhan Vong warrior reached for him. The cable connected to the warrior's open hand, and the jolt of electricity flash-fried the warrior.

Smoking, the Yuuzhan Vong warrior dropped to the ground, much deader than his predecessor.
"Fleet-Captain Fel, we are attempting to link back up with General Solo's Fleet. I left several vessels behind to pick up any survivors of Garik Loran's group.
Breathing heavily, Jagged straightened and brushed off his uniform the best he could. Though bruised and battered, he made his way to the comlink at the door and replied. "Are there any Yuuzhan Vong still in system?"
"A smaller task force has been left behind. They are currently pursuing Jaina Solo."
The weariness immediately left Jagged. "Then bring the fleet around and move to assist Jedi Solo." As an afterthought, he added. "So long as there are Yuuzhan Vong in this system, they are a danger Hapes."
Jagged then deactivated the comm and leaned against the door frame, flinching as his ribs twinged. Taking several breaths, he disengaged himself and forced himself to walk back through a corpse filled hallway. Bodies, human and Yuuzhan Vong littered the area, the consequences of a suicide boarding squad. These Vong had tried to make their way to the engines, but the security forces had caused them to abandon the plan. The Vong had been stopped, but at great cost.
Jagged blocked out the devastation as he limped through the hallway. One battle was fought, now he had to attend to another, such was the life of a soldier.
|* *|
The Battle of Hapes was nearing its conclusion as Han Solo directed his fleet towards his daughter's position. The time Jaina had brought had allowed his battered bunch to catch their breath and recollect themselves. The withdrawal of the main portion of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet had caused cheers to go up all around, but when a sizable force was left behind, they had realized that the fight wasn't quite over.
"Captain Fel's group will be on station in another thirty minutes," reported the helm operator.
"Time 'til we reach my daughter's position?"
"Ten minutes. The fighter squadrons will be there in four. The Queen Mother can be there in two, but she will be drastically outnumbered."
"Switch me over to Kyp's group." Han said. "Kyp, it's Han. I'll leave my daughter to you, get her out of there."
"Don't worry so much Han, Jaina's a tough girl. The Dozen, or what's left of us, is on it."

"I appreciate it, kid." Han sighed, slumping back in the captain's chair. Though his fighter groups hadn't been quite as wiped out as those in Face's group, they still had taken heavy casualties. Kyp's Dozen was now Kyp's Five, with other squadrons receiving a similar deduction in numbers.

The defense of Hapes had cost much, but at the same time, the defenders could actually feel that victory was near.

The next ten minutes were the longest of Han's life as the *Flames of Dathomir* streamed towards the planet the *Trickster* was using as cover. His ship now had more than burnt layers of paint as damage. Two of the engines had been destroyed by suicide coralskippers, and multiple hull breaches decorated the exterior of the ship. They had lost two-thirds of their weapon batteries and their hyperdrive had been knocked out. Not that they need it. The latter, not the former. They definitely had a need for guns.

By the time the capital ships limped into the fight, the battle was already raging. Tenel Ka and her two escort ships were doing their best to assist Kyp and the other fighter squadrons, but the numbers were against them. The Hapan corvettes and the *Rock Dragon* were being battered left and right by several Yuuzhan Vong cruisers. All the while, the diminished Hapan fighter squadrons were doing their best to hold off the numerically superior Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers. The arrival of Han's group of capital ships was much appreciated.

"Target the nearest Vong ship and let 'em have it," Han ordered. "Sensors, can you locate my daughter?"

"We wouldn't be able to differentiate her ship from the other Vong, it has no New Republic or Hapan IFF."

"Blast it! Rhysode, use your Jedi sense, find her! The last thing she needs is for everyone to start firing one her."

"She's making a run towards the planet's moon," Ganner replied after a moment.

"Sensors?"

"I've picked up three Yuuzhan Vong frigates a battleship and a battle cruiser in that area. I can't tell who is who."

"Well get over there and fire at the ones firing on one of those frigates."

"Yes, sir."

"We have Yuuzhan Vong ships on an intercept course."

"Tell the *Red Sun* and *Rainfall* to cover us," Han said, mentioning the two Hapan battle cruisers that was their escort.

"The *Red Sun* is responding, by the *Rainfall* is bogged down in enemy ships."

"Alone the *Sun* won't be able to hold off our three friends," Han swore. "Is anyone else in position to help?"
"Three fighters from Vanguard Squadron are offering their complement of missiles."
"See if they can't knock out the Vongs' engines."
Ganner, who had been looking over the shoulder of one of the sensor operators caught Han's eye. "We've manage to isolate one of the Vong frigates as Jaina's."
"Broadcast the information to the rest of the fleet."
"Already done."
"And the Vong fleet?"
"Their attacks are unorganized and haphazard, but they still show a discipline that's keeping their ships effective in battle."
"Of course they would," Han grumbled. "Put me in contact with my daughter's frigate."
"Dad?"
"Hey sweetie, you look like you're in a bind."
"You know me, just carrying on the family tradition."
"Need a hand?"
"Some warrior named Khadal is in the Vong battle cruiser. If you can vape him, the others will probably follow the main group out of the system."
"On it," Han said. "Comm-officer, get whoever we can and make a beeline for the battle cruiser. Make it a priority target."
"Both the *Rock Dragon* and *Morning Crest* are moving into position."
Han flicked through the read-out and statuses of the allied ships. The aft of Tenel Ka's vessel was completely in the red, with multiple breaches and fires raging. It was the text-book definition of someone who had gotten their rear shot off. The Hapan battle cruiser, *Morning Crest,* on the other hand, looked as if it had received a bad sunburn. The entire ship was a depicted in a light red, showing moderate damage from bridge to engines. Atmosphere was venting at various intervals, yet, the captain somehow kept the ship together. He had to hand it to the resoluteness of the Hapan officers. Though the fact they were defending their home planet with their queen looking over their shoulders might have had something to do with it.
"We're also picking up a squadron of fighters and two corvettes," the comm-officer reported. "All others are…"
"Sir! We've just lost the *Red Sun*! Two Yuuzhan Vong cruisers still moving to intercept."

"Flames of Dathomir, this is Royal Leader and what's left of Trident and Radiant Squadrons. By orders of the Queen Mother, Tenel Ka Djo, we're at your disposal."
"Great, how many warheads do you guys have left?"
"We're all out, unfortunately. On the bright side, the Vong no longer have any fighter support."
"Alright," Han exhaled to himself. He switch the comm back on. "Okay, do your best to take out the engines of the two ships trying to get in our way. Once you do, get out of here and rendezvous in orbit around Hapes. Reload if you can, because if this doesn't work, we'll still have a large number of bad guys to deal with."
"Affirmative, Flames. We'll do our best."
"General Solo, we're in firing range now."
Han stabbed a finger at the viewport. "Give Khadal everything we have."
"All functioning batteries firing now."
|* *|
Had Jacen's eyes been open, he would have seen a stream of violent bolts of energy descend onto the Yuuzhan Vong chasing his sister. Maintaining the Force-meld between the countless Jedi in the region, however, required a fair amount of concentration. If he focused hard enough he could even pick out the individual thoughts from the Jedi within the meld.
Kell Tainer you better come back to me and your son alive! I am not losing you!
Captain, tell Solo that our hijacked destroyer has been knocked out of commission. We're taking the Typhoon assault shuttle out of here.
I've lost another one. Great, I just keep leading Jedi to their deaths don't I? Han was definitely right about me.
This is insane, I can't believe we're actually going to come out of this alive.
"Anything of interest, Jacen?"
Jacen opened his eyes to see Vergere crouched down in front of him. "Not really.
"A pity. " Vergere took a seat next to him. They were in the captain's quarters, sound-proofed for privacy and the perfect place to concentrate. "Perhaps, if you will allow me to join with you, through a Force-bond, I can show you more."
"I'd be grateful for any help you can offer." Jacen allowed his eyes to flutter close.
Reach out through the Force, Jacen. Use all your senses. Remember what I taught you on Coruscant. The Force is one with <u>everything</u>.

Concentrate on the slaveseed I have implanted in you, my gift to you. Feel it react to the presence of the Yuuzhan Vong. Pass the bulkheads, through the void of space.

Jacen tried to concentrate on the alien life embedded within him, his breathing shallow as he recalled the pain and agony associated with it.

That's it. It is a living creature, no different than you or me. Just as you feel pain, it does too. Use that pain to find a common ground. All is one with the Force.

Jacen exhaled shakily. It was if he had suddenly plunged himself into a pitch black pool of water. Icy cold sensations spreading out from his chest, starting where the slave-seed was and coursing to his limbs. His breathing became even more ragged, panic, he couldn't breathe, fear of dying.

Shhh....shhh....you will not die Jacen Solo. I will not let you. But you can see it, can you not? The spark of life, not of this galaxy.

And through the darkness, Jacen suddenly saw a shadow. He focused on it, anchoring himself to this strange presence within him. The moment he made contact with it, it was as if a switch had suddenly been thrown. He let out a shuddering gasp, his eyes flying open, but unseeing. He recognized this shadow. It was so similar to the many creatures he had connected to in the past. It was the slave-seed, but it was more.

Jacen stared vacantly at the bulkhead. It was as if the entire ship had vanished from around him. He was sitting, cross-legged, in space. The living entities the Yuuzhan Vong used as ships were pulsating, clear as day, all around him. He could make out individual warriors aboard each ship, the alien grutchin and beating hearts within the dovin basals. All of them were glowing.

With his slaveseed as his focus, Jacen could almost, just almost, sense the thoughts of the warriors, but the barrier between them was too wide. In shock, Jacen pulled himself out of this strange world, cold sweat soaking his shirt as the room around him came back into focus.

Vergere inclined her head, looking pleased. "For a beginner, that was not bad, Jacen Solo. With practice, you will no doubt do well."

"That was Vongsense, wasn't it?" Jacen breathed. "What Anakin learned to do when he got back from Yavin Four."

"You tell me," Vergere chirped lightly. "I only helped you to see what you needed to see, that the galaxy is so much more than light or dark. There is so much more even your vaunted Skywalker does not know of the Force."

"Can other Jedi learn how to sense the Vong?"

"I am afraid not," Vergere shook her head. "It requires a certain aptitude and an open mind."
"An open mind?"
"Tell me, would all Jedi approve of using pain to achieve a new insight into the universe?" Vergere said mockingly.
Jacen blinked, silently studying Vergere for a moment. "They would not."
"If one is prejudiced against what one might consider 'dark side' techniques, then one will never be able to reach the same understanding you have."
"But what about Anakin? Didn't he reach the same understanding of the Force?"
"Ask him what he senses," Vergere said calmly. "Ask him how clear his 'Vongsense' is. I have taught you something that can only be learned through the technique I just showed you. On Coruscant I stripped away your fear, your happiness, your despair, your hope, until the only thing left was pain. I did so for a reason. The Yuuzhan Vong embrace pain as their religion. Once one is in pain, nothing else exists, nothing else matters except for the desire for the pain to end. You understand them in a way no other Jedi can. That is why you saw what you did when you focused on your slaveseed. That is why your visions will always be as clear. Tell me, Jacen Solo, do you believe any other Jedi has the capacity for such understanding? Will they ever see the Yuuzhan Vong as something other than heartless monsters?"
Jacen thought for a moment. He was about to agree wholeheartedly, but then, a name came to him. "Tahiri."
Vergere tilted her head curiously. "Tahiri?"
"Tahiri…Kwaad. She was partially shaped on Yavin Four."
"Ah…yes." Vergere tilted her head in the other direction. "She is close to your brother, is she not?"
"They're best friends," Jacen confirmed. "Maybe more. I haven't been the closest to him recently."
"Then perhaps, later, you can try and teach her how to see as you do," Vergere said, despite her words, her statement sounded more like an order than a recommendation. "But, to the matter at hand. While you were viewing the Yuuzhan Vong, did you see anything that could help the others obtain a victory?"
Jacen briefly wracked his mind. He had been more surprised by anything and couldn't remember much. With another breath, he focused back on the slaveseed, the pain that bound them together. The room melted away once again, he was among the stars, among

the glowing entities that bore the life energies of the Yuuzhan Vong. Slowly, he surveyed each ship.
But even as he did, a throbbing in his head, that had once been an echo, grew in strength. Jacen endured it for as long as he could before returning his senses back to the room. He immediately grabbed his head, gasping as he did.
Vergere looked on, expressionlessly.
"What…?" Jacen gasped, a coppery taste in his mouth informed him that he had bitten his tongue.
"You have only just begun to see the Yuuzhan Vong for who they are. Practice will allow you to see more, but until then, you should limit yourself. Knowledge is good, but in excess, unhealthy." Vergere said, as if lecturing a student. "Now, before you forget…"
Jacen nodded and reached back out to the Force-meld. He felt various levels of surprise from the others, but ignored it, instead revealing what he had learned.
|* *|
Han turned his attention back on the main target. Khadal Lah's ship, the *Stalking Shadow,* had a powerful defensive network, and it was clear that they wouldn't be able to stop him before he reached Jaina's ship. Despite this, Han and the rest of the Hapan ships continued to surge forward. Ganner, acting on advice from Jacen, was helping to focus the multitude of fire on several key locations on the Vong battle cruiser. The effects were slowly but surely making themselves known.
"All ships, continue to fire on Khadal's vessel!" Han ordered, gripping the arms of his chair seat.
Hapan fighters swooshed in from all directions, firing the last of their warheads and cycling their laser cannons as rapidly as possible. The smaller capital ships limped in to add to the destruction, turbolaser and ion batteries pouring pure destruction onto the massive Vong ship. Torpedoes fired from fighters and capital ships flew by plasma projectiles, streaks of yellow and blue burning through space in an exchange of fire. Several of the torpedoes hit, downing several Yuuzhan Vong ships and damaging others. Plasma projectiles smashed across the shields of the Hapan vessels, and one battleship received a direct hit on the bridge. The resulting implosion ripped it apart, causing the ships in formation close by to veer away.
The hull of Khadal Lah's ship was already eroding from the constant bombardment when Jagged Fel's fleet group joined the fray. Over a dozen, intact and powerful capital ships came storming in at full speed. Two small Yuuzhan Vong vessels were smashed against the hull of

Jagged's flagship, while said ship unloaded its full armament into Khadal's vessel.
The *Stalking Shadow* tried to fight back, targeting Jaina's vessel with any weapon it could. But the moment a plasma cannon opened fire, it was hit with repeated laser and missile blasts until it was a smoking pit in the side of the Vong battle cruiser. Khadal's ship was fast running out of guns, and out of healthy segments of ship.
An explosion rippled across its spine, sending charred bits of coral flying everywhere. The Hapan vessels relentlessly took advantage of the wound and pounded the inside of the Vong ship with everything they had. The *Stalking Shadow* shuddered violently, before more explosions began to punch out holes in various locations.
The death blow occurred when Jaina sent the *Trickster* on a final loop. Once lined up with the Yuuzhan Vong command ship, the stolen frigate's weapons blazed, pouring plasma and magma in sheets of destruction. The *Stalking Shadow* seemed to expand for a fraction of a second, before it blew apart in an all-consuming fireball.
There was no celebration, however. The remaining Yuuzhan Vong ships still seemed willing to fight to the death and were determined to take as many Hapans with them as possible. Several of the more damaged Yuuzhan Vong vessels steered themselves directly at the *Flames of Dathomir* and other Hapan capital ships.
Not all were shot down in time.
Han was thrown off his feet as one particular Yuuzhan Vong ship slammed into the *Flames of Dathomir*.
"Report!" Han called, he winced as he pulled himself up to his feet. He was definitely getting too old for this.
"The impact severed the lower saucer," a bloodied helmsman reported. "Heavy casualties. The Yuuzhan Vong, however, have been routed and Fleet-Captain Fel's forces are securing the area. We have recovery crews out now."
Han rolled his eyes. "Great, so much for keeping the most advance ship in the Hapan fleet in one piece."
The Hapan captain inclined her head. "At least you promised to pay for the damages. You are in command after all, general."
"As long as you rename the ship after me," Han said dryly. "I need to be getting something out of the deal."
"You want a ship named, the *Han Solo*? A Hapan ship?"
"Good point. You can name it after Anakin. He did just rescue Jacen and the Queen Mother after all," Han reached up and found that his fall to the deck had cut a gash in his head. He made a face. "Provided Leia lets me live long enough to provide the donation."

"I will inform the Queen Mother of your decision."
"Wait, you do know I was joking, right? Right?"
"You have a problem with calling a ship the *Anakin Solo?*"
"I'm just saying, to name a ship after my kids is a little much. They're still alive after all."
"In the end, it is still the Queen Mother's decision," the captain said, though a hint of a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.
"Wait a minute, you're messing with me!"
"Sir, you have known the people of Hapes for a long time. We have no sense of humor."
Han rubbed at his face tiredly. "Out of all the Hapan captains, they team me up with a comedian. At least we've got this battle under our belts."
"Indeed," the Hapan captain glanced through a scrolling list of reports. "But the cost was great."
"We're still alive, captain."
"We are. You command well, for a man. It is clear why you are considered a hero in the New Republic. Perhaps…after today, you will be seen as a hero by the people of Hapes as well."
"Naw, leave that hero business to the younger generation. I just want this war to be over, to retire in peace, and watch my kids grow up and be happy."
"You are well on your way to accomplishing your wish." They looked out the cracked viewport, seeing the burnt out husks of so many ships, Yuuzhan Vong and Hapan alike. "If you and your allies continue to win battles such as this, perhaps the war is not far from its end."
I* Chapter End *I
21/7/12: Minor edits. Story will be over sixty chapters long when I'm done with it (currently on Final Prophecy, chapter 57. Maybe two more chapter, then an intermission, then a 7-9 chapter Unifying Force).

ADA 10 Interlude

Ten
I **I**
It was if the entire planet was celebrating. Everyone was out in the streets, streamers and fireworks filling the air. Sky-platforms were raining confetti as everyone screamed in joy until their throats were sore. Shuttles descended from the sky; landing in the streets, on the outskirts of town, anywhere there was room. As they emptied, the soldiers who emerged were mobbed by the ecstatic crowd. Several

larger landing craft touched down, and though these were filled with the wounded, they received just as warm a welcome.
For a planet that underwent a civil war, regicide, three changes of the crown (only one of which was official), and an alien invasion fleet all within a two day period, Hapes was in relatively good condition.
When the *Rock Dragon* entered the atmosphere, escorted by a mishmash of fighters from different squadrons, the local HoloNet cameras recorded every meter of its descent. The cheers increased in volume as it made a pass over the capital city, the battered fighters around it flying in a perfect diamond formation. As the *Rock Dragon* neared the palace, its escort split off in four directions before flying in an upward arc.
The *Rock Dragon* touched down to a royal welcome, with both Isolder and Teneniel at the forefront of a column of honor guards. Tenel Ka emerged from the craft, inclining her head politely at those before her. As one, both Isolder and Teneniel knelt before her. The large crowd of honor guards followed suit.
"Welcome back, Queen Mother," Isolder said formally. "We are grateful that you have returned victorious."
Tenel Ka quirked an eyebrow. "As am I. Rise father. Mother."
Isolder rose. "Traditions must be observed."
"I believe celebration is more in order than tradition today," Tenel Ka remarked. She noted the rest of the crowd. "Rise."
"Three cheers for the Queen Mother!" Isolder called out in order. "She has passed her trial and led our people to a resounding victory!"
As the entire platform erupted in cheer, Tenel Ka briefly narrowed her eyes at her father. Even so, she took in the good atmosphere with some amount of relief. Evidently earning the support of her people wouldn't be as challenging as she had expected.
"It is not often I will have the opportunity to embarrass you, daughter." Isolder remarked with a ghost of a smile.
"Perhaps, some traditions should be maintained after all," Tenel Ka said with a mock glare as the cheers died down.
Isolder simply inclined his head and stepped to the side, his smile not leaving his face.
Teneniel stepped forward and gently took her daughters hands in her own. "I wish you a long and happy reign, my daughter."
At the sound of her voice, Tenel Ka met her mother's eyes. "You are not staying?"
"Hapes…" Teneniel appeared to search for the right words. "I no longer have a place on Hapes. What I once had, I lost the day I lost your sister."

"Where will you go?" Tenel Ka did her best to fight back the swell of emotion in her stomach.
"To Dathomir, of course," Teneniel said. "There I will find myself again. Find what I need to continue to live."
"Does father know this?"
"He does. He has offered to come with me, but instead I will have him stay here and advise you."
"Will *you* be okay?" Tenel Ka reflexively tightened her grip around her mother's bony hands.
Teneniel freed one hand and gently cupped her daughter's cheek. "Do not worry for me, my daughter. The people of Hapes are now your first concern, your life. I regret that I could not be strong enough to continue to carry this burden, but I know that you will make a fine ruler."
"I will miss you." The words were out of Tenel Ka's mouth before she could stop them.
"As I, you, daughter," Teneniel replied, dropping both her hands. "Take care, and…may the Force be with you."
‖ **‖**
Despite the celebrations occuring throughout Hapes, not many were witness to the grim business occurring back in the battlefield. The recovery of pilots who had gone EV, the patching together of badly damaged ships, and scraping those too far gone, was a laborious task that required much coordination. Sifting through the graveyard of ships, especially those closest to the asteroid belt, was a dangerous task. There was no telling what, if any, traps the Yuuzhan Vong might have left. Added to this difficulty was the fact that many of the debris were already floating into the asteroid belt itself; being churned apart like a swimmer going through a series of rapids. Secondary explosions flashed, as leaking reactors and power converters detonated upon impact with the large belt of space rock.
And looking at it all was Booster Terrik, the captain of the *Errant Venture.* The only Imperial Star Destroyer in private ownership*.* Or what was left of it anyways. The entire front third of the prow was gone, and it looked as if a giant herd of Rancors had been allowed to play on the surviving portion of the ship. Fires ran rampant on nearly every deck, going out only after eating up all the oxygen in the area. Over the course of the battle, his ship had gone from being fully equipped, to having no guns at all. The bridge deflector shields were non-existent. As was a good portion of the bridge tower itself, thanks to a suicidal Yuuzhan Vong corvette.

Now, staring at the scene from the ship's secondary bridge, the former-smuggler-turned-Star Destroyer captain rubbed the back of his head in wonder. "I guess Booster Terrik's luck hasn't run out yet."
"Mom says there's no such thing as luck."
Booster glowered at the Tainer's child. "Yeah, yeah, the Force, I know boy. But tell me, will the Force also repay me for the damages to the ship? I'll have to be really lucky to get the New Republic to foot the bill. Unless, of course, you want to use your Jedi ways and make them pay me?"
"That'd be abusing the Force," Doran Sarkin-Tainer commented with a frown.
"There, so you see, there's also a great matter of luck involved in life," Booster said, as if it settled things. "Do you have a fix on your mom's X-wing?"
Doran pointed to a cluster of debris. "There, dad's there too."
"Nel'shar, set a course to 'there'," Booster ordered his Twi'lek helmsman.
"Course set."
"At least that's another two Wraiths recovered," said the only Wraith to survive with her X-wing intact and in operational order, Bhindi Drayson. Of the others, two were still missing, Rani D'ne was dead, and the rest were now in bacta tanks with varying degrees of near-fatal injuries.
"Now all we have to do is find the boss and Dia Passik."
"Don't suppose your Jedi abilities can help here too?" Booster glanced at Doran. "My ship is leaking atmosphere and we can't stay out here much longer."
"I don't know dad's commander well enough," Doran shook his head. "But once we get mom back on board, she can help."
"Wonderful," Booster remarked dryly. "And she better help us find Loran. That man owes me a new set of guns."
"Sir," the replacement communication's officer, the original one was sucked out of the bridge during the hull breach, called out. "We have an incoming communications from the *Pulsar Skate.*"
"Let's hear it."
"Daddy! Are you okay!" Mirax's panicked voice filled the secondary bridge.
"Of course I'm okay!" Booster grumbled. "It'll take more than a fleet of cut up alien rejects to take down Booster Terrik."
"But your ship...The bridge... I mean, Corran told me you were okay but..."
"I said I'm okay already, so quit your worrying."

"You obviously sound fine." Mirax's next comment was given in a choked laugh.
"And you, Mirax? Since that no good son-in-law of mine had to drag you into this mess, you better not have gotten hurt."
"I'm fine, dad." Everyone on the bridge could almost hear Mirax roll her eyes. *"And Corran is right here."*
"Good," Booster huffed. "Then I don't have to repeat myself when I say that Cor-Sec will be in serious trouble if he ever makes me come after the two of you like this again."
"Love you too, father-in-law."
"That's it! I…"
"*Do you need any help with the recovery efforts?"*
Booster glared at the comm-system. "If you weren't married to my daughter…Anyway, I seemed to have misplaced two Wraiths; you think you could use your Jedi magic and make them appear?"
"We'll get right on it. And Booster…"
"What?"
"I mean it when I say that it's great to see that you made it out of this in one piece."
"I wish the same can be said for my ship," Booster muttered. "Just get going and find those Wraiths, Cor-Sec."
"Will do, Pulsar Skate out."
The channel closed and Booster stared impassively at the graveyard once more. Doran tilted his head up as his Force-assisted hearing picked up Booster chanting something under his breath.
"I am not getting soft on him, I am never going to warm to him…Good for nothing Jedi Cor-Sec"
I **I**
Anja Gallandro woke to the soft beeping of a monitor and let out a small sigh. She recognized the lounge of the *Lady Luck*. "I'm still alive, huh?"
"Yes you are, young lady," Lando said. He made his way over from the opposite side of the lounge and crouched down by her. "How do you feel?"
Anja blinked up at the ceiling, realizing that she couldn't feel a thing. Nor could she move. "Numb."
"That's good. That means the new implant is working."
"New?"
"We took off shortly after the Vong left to get you some high-end medical care," Lando said. "The Jedi did what they could for you, but you needed a more permanent solution. You burnt out your old implant and worsened your condition."

"I'm still alive," Anja pointed out.
"You can thank the new implant for that," Lando motioned towards the implant, brushing her hair out of her eyes for her. "From what the doctors said. If it weren't for this little piece of tech, your body would currently have painful spasms beyond your control. After a couple of days, your body's nervous system should return to normal. You'll still have to tap your implant every so often, but it's better than the alternative. Your nervous system is degrading at an even faster rate than before and the only thing we can really do is delay its progress. Tapping the implant will cause paralysis to all but the most vital parts of your body. At the same time any pain as well as the negative effects of your condition, will be halted."
"I didn't have a choice, Lando."
"I know, I know," Lando said, he suddenly looked a lot older than she had ever seen him. "You just get better, Ms. Gallandro."
"I'm glad working for you had such great health benefits after all," Anja managed with a small laugh.
"You know me. I treat my people the best," Lando said with a winning smile, though Anja could tell it was forced. "Can't have the competition steal them away."
Anja blinked back tears. "Don't worry about me, Lando. I'll be fine. Where are we headed now?"
"To buy a cargo ship, and then to drop off the cargo with another New Republic fleet," Lando answered.
"You have cargo but no ship to transport it?"
"I know, I know. You don't have to say it. This was more of a spur of the moment thing. It was only after we got your treatment that I realized we didn't have a large enough ship for the cargo I had."
"What's the ship called?" Anja was beginning to find not being able to move a bit frustrating.
"Oh, something along the lines of *Record Time* I think," Lando shrugged. "The contact and seller belongs to Tendra, so she'd know more."
Anja felt a wave of fatigue and she closed her eyes again. "Great, I'll ask her later."
"Get some rest, Ms. Gallandro. That's an order."
"Yes sir, boss." Anja said. "And thanks for taking care of me. It must have been a pain."
"No," Lando smiled sadly, but Anja was already fast asleep. "No trouble at all, young lady. You just keep on living. I'm not ready to say goodbye to another friend just yet."
I **I**

Aboard what was left of the pride and joy of the Hapan Royal Navy, the *Flames of Dathomir*, Han scowled at the casualty list. Though he had been through many battles and come out alive, he couldn't shake the cold feeling in his stomach at the sheer numbers recorded. And the list was only growing as more remains were uncovered. To think he had once again outlived thousands of men and women, some no older than his own children.

"This isn't right," Han muttered softly to himself.

The door chime rang, and Han put the data pad down. "Come in."

No sooner had the door whooshed open than Han saw a blur of white as his wife crossed the small distance to embrace him. "Han!"

"Easy princess," Han said, completely bemused. "I'm all right."

"You better be, Han!" Leia breathed, hugging the stuffing out of him.

"I am, or was. Think you can let me breathe?"

Leia took a step away. "Your ship looks horrible."

"You should see the other guy." Han said lightly.

"What were you looking at?" Leia gestured to the datapad Han had put aside.

"Casualty and damage reports," Han sighed. "We might have won this round, but if the Vong come back, there's no way Hapes can hold them off again."

"The Yuuzhan Vong came for our kids," Leia said in a steely tone. "As long as Jacen, Jaina, and Anakin are here, Hapes will be in danger."

Han nodded knowingly. "I've been in contact with Booster, once we wrap up the recovery efforts; we're taking our kids, and the other Jedi, out of the system. If the Vong don't have a reason to invade, they won't bother Hapes again."

"You already have a location in mind?"

"Borleias."

"Borleias?" Leia frowned. "That's still under Yuuzhan Vong control."

"I have it on good authority that it'll be in friendly hands again once we're ready to move out. Since it lies on the major hyperspace routes, we can follow the path to Mon-Cal. Between the Second and Third Fleets and the planetary defenses, I think we should be relatively safe there."

"Mon Cal? Blue seas, a cool breeze, sunshine."

"And most importantly, no Vong," Han added, landing a brief kiss on his wife's cheek as he stood. "Once we get to Borleias, we'll be home free. What could possibly go wrong?"

I **I**

There was a solemn air in the atmosphere as Tenel Ka, dressed in the royal garb of the Hapan Queen Mother, stood at the entryway of the

palace throne room. The young woman mentally acknowledged the rows of nobles, soldiers, and onlookers as the music playing in the background reached a crescendo. Much to Tenel Ka's dismay, Isolder and Teneniel had insisted on a proper coronation ceremony. Not only would it give Tenel Ka additional legitimacy, it would help to unite the recently fractured population of the Hapes Consortium.

Naturally, Tenel Ka's friends insisted on being present, and to avoid the danger their prolonged stay might present, a ceremony was planned and executed with undue haste. In that time, everyone caught up on much needed sleep. While immense amounts of overtime pay was doled out to the cleaning crews who worked through the night sprucing up the palace and removing corpses. The hard work had paid off. Now, the throne room glittered brilliantly, the setting sun streaming in from the towering, recently installed windows.

Seated on the throne on the opposite side of the room, where the usurper Alyssia had only been deposed a scant three days earlier, was Teneniel Djo. A slender diadem embedded with rainbow gems from the planet of Gallinore, each gem representing a system within the Hapes Consortium, sat on an embroidered, purple pillow held by Isolder.

Taking a deep breath, Tenel Ka strode up to the throne, ensuring that her steps fell to the beat of the stirring music that filled the room. In her short trip, she felt the Force presences of her friends, reaching out to her to provide support. Tenel Ka sent a wave of gratefulness in return and, as she had done on the landing platform, stopped in front of her mother. Keeping her eyes focused up at her mother, she knelt on one knee.

"Tenel Ka Djo," Teneniel said, her voice amplified and transmitted by the holo-cameras fluttering around the room. Not only was all of Hapes watching, but the broadcast was reaching every single planet in the Consortium. "My daughter. As is the tradition of Hapes, I pass down the title of Queen Mother to you. Does anyone here wish to bring forth a question to her before she takes up the crown?"

A single noble stepped forward. "I do, Queen Mother Teneniel."

Teneniel inclined her head. "Then ask."

"Queen Mother Tenel Ka, I believe that there is no other more worthy of the crown than you, but I must ask: will you truly be able to serve Hapes, or will your ties to the Jedi interfere?"

Tenel Ka turned to face the crowd, flash-bulbs going off from all over. She took a moment to organize her thoughts, then responded. "As your Queen Mother, my first and *only* duty will be to the people of Hapes. My ties to the Jedi are no different than our trade-alliances and military treaties with other systems. They will benefit the Hapes Consortium,

just as our friendship with the others systems benefits them. In these times, it is imperative that Hapes does not stand alone. If it were not for the sacrifices of our New Republic and Jedi allies, there is no doubt that we would have fallen. By ensuring and strengthening the ties to our allies, the well-being of the Hapes Consortium will be secured. Hapes will once again be whole, and we will become the envy of all others. My background as a Jedi has shaped who I am, but I am also Hapan, and I will *always* do what is best for Hapes."

Tenel Ka hazarded a glance at her friends in the front row, receiving supportive grins from all of them and an additional, subtle, thumbs-up from Jacen. She turned her full attention to the noble who had asked the question, and he bowed in turn.

"I am satisfied, Queen Mother," Lord Denovar stepped back. "May you live long and rule well."

Teneniel stepped away from her throne with the diadem in hand. "Tenel Ka Djo, I present to you with the Crown of Gallinore. The gems represent the trust each system of Hapes places in you, protect them and never lose that trust."

Tenel Ka knelt and Teneniel placed the diadem atop her head. Rising, Tenel Ka turned back to the massive crowd. As she did, as one, they lowered themselves to one knee and bowed their heads.

"Long Live Queen Mother Tenel Ka Djo!"

Tenel Ka descended back down the stairs to her friends while Teneniel and Isolder followed behind. Once Tenel Ka was at the lowest step, she motioned with her hands and everyone rose.

"Thank you all for entrusting me with Hapes. I shall endeavor to do my best for the good of Hapes and our people."

As the entire room exploded in applause for the new Queen Mother and the stable transition, Tenel Ka moved to embrace each of her Jedi friends.

"We're going to miss you, Tenel Ka," Zekk said.

"Take care." Jaina added.

"You're giving up the life of a Jedi for politics?" Jacen said with a lopsided smile.

Tenel Ka hugged him, her arms lingering around his waist a bit longer than they had the others. Tilting her head so that she could whisper into his ear. "You will visit, Jacen?"

"When I have the time, your Highness."

"Soon then," Tenel Ka murmured, stepping away.

Tenel Ka shook hands with Alema, Tesar, and Ganner, found herself with a mouth full of fur when Lowbacca swooped her up in a bear-hug, and exchanged brief hugs with both Tahiri and Anakin.

"Be well, you two," Tenel Ka said softly.
"You as well," Anakin nodded.
Tenel Ka then stopped in front of Luke Skywalker, who bowed politely.
"Queen Mother."
"Master Skywalker."
"Your presence will be missed," Luke said.
"Hapes needs me."
"I know. I could not be more proud of you."
"Thank you, coming from you Master Skywalker…I am grateful for your blessing."
"You have entire alliance of planets to run," Luke motioned. "Don't let me keep you from your people."
Doing her best to ignore the anxious fluttering in her stomach, Tenel Ka finally stepped away from her friends, her childhood, towards the throng of nobles, and assumed her place as the Queen Mother of sixty-three star systems.
| **|**
"And he's awake at last." Garik 'Face' Loran heard through the bacta tank's speaker system.
"It's about time." Another said.
Face blinked weakly, flinching as the dim light in the room played havoc with his retinas. There should be some rule about mocking naked people in bacta tanks. As the world outside the tank gradually swam into focus, he could just make out the blurry faces of several members of his squad.
"Have a good nap?" Dia Passik said stonily, her twitching lekku betraying her relief.
"Swell," Face croaked. "Everyone else?"
"Both Tainers are still in bacta, they're lazy too," Elassar Targon, the Wraith's Devorian pilot, answered.
"Sharr and Baljos both made it out after being ejected from their fighters, they're resting right now, Elassar's orders." Piggy answered. "Bhindi's the only one who made it out unscathed."
Face saw the others glance timidly at Dia, who rolled her eyes and shrugged. "The only Wraith squadron casualty is Rani."
Recalling the Zeltron's death, Face nodded soberly. "Yeah."
Piggy stepped forward. "We're currently on a freighter heading out of the system. Orders from New Republic Intelligence. They want us to pick up one of their operatives who was fleeing Coruscant and deliver them to Borleias."
"Never a dull day for us Wraiths," Face sighed. "From galactic changing battles to a personal taxi service."

"At least it won't be as eventful." Dia said lightly, she pointedly glanced at the others. They seemed to all find something else to do and left the room. "Face…I won't be sticking around."
"Dia?"
Dia looked pained. "I have promises to keep, and as much as I would love to stay with you guys…"
Face swallowed, suddenly hating the confining nature of the bacta tank. He reached out a placed a hand on the transparasteel tank.
"When are you leaving?"
"I was going to leave once we secured Hapes," Dia murmured, placing her own hand over his. All that separated them was the thin layer of see-through material. "I was just waiting for you to recover. Didn't want to leave without saying…goodbye."
Face exhaled into his oxygen mask. "Well, goodbye then."
Dia's expression flickered, regret, sorrow. "See you around the galaxy, Loran."
Despite the stabbing pain in his chest, which Face was sure had nothing to do with the wounds he had sustained from being ejected from his fighter, Face smiled gamely. "You too, Passik."
Dia's hand slid down the tank and her arm fell at her side. With one last breath, the Twi'lek turned and walked away.
Face allowed a small, wry smirk once she was gone. "Didn't even look back."
I **I**
The *Millennium Falcon* had been through many things in its very long life; had survived countless battles and changes in the political landscape of the galaxy. Its many scars and modifications were a testament to its longevity and resilience. Now, as it sat on one of the many landing pads of the Hapan palace, it waited to add yet another chapter in its life.
"Okay kids, since we don't want any more Vong problems for a while, if you could board in an orderly fashion and we'll be on our way," Han said lightly, motioning to the group of Jedi, namely his children.
"We're going, dad, we're going," Jaina said dryly, stepping back from a certain Clawcraft pilot. "Keep in touch, Jag?"
Jag raised a fine eyebrow. "I should hope so, Solo. My flight is your escort to Borleias."
"Really?"
"Your father did not inform you?"
Jaina sent a glare over her shoulder to the aforementioned parental figure. "No."

"I will speak with you later," Jag said formally. "I must rejoin the rest of my flight."
"Right," Jaina said, smiling lopsidedly as she gave him one last wave and darted up the *Falcon*'s boarding ramp. "Later Jag."
Han shook his head as his daughter disappeared into the ship, then looked back for his remaining children. "One down."
Jacen was running a hand through his messy brown hair as he wrapped up his own goodbyes. "Well, this is it."
"It is," Tenel Ka said.
"You'll be fine without all of us? The Vong could still return."
Tenel Ka, in a rare display of emotion, smiled faintly. "I will be fine Jacen Solo, my friend. If I do have need of you though…"
"All you have to do is ask," Jacen said solemnly, his brown eyes glinting playfully. "I'll even run your kingdom for a day. You know, if you need a break."
Tenel Ka stepped close and wrapped her arms around him in an awkward hug. Tilting her head back, she placed a brief kiss on his cheek. "I will definitely miss you, my best friend."
Well aware of the many eyes that were suddenly focused on him, Jacen hesitantly patted Tenel Ka's back. "Hey, I'm not going away forever. I'll definitely visit, and you can show me all those creatures that live on Gallinore and the other nature preserves in the Hapes Cluster."
Tenel Ka detached herself from Jacen and fondly brushed his cheek with the back of her hand. "I will look forward to that day."
"Come on Jacen!" Han called out, rolling his eyes.
"Coming dad! Coming! Goodbye, Tenel Ka."
Tenel Ka's grey eyes glimmered. "For now, Jacen."
Jacen moved to board, but was stopped by his father's hand. "Do you know where Anakin is?"
Jacen blinked. "Where's Tahiri?"
Han chuckled. "That was going to be my next question."
Jacen was about to search the Force for Anakin, when Han's comlink chirped.
"Solo here."
"Hey dad," Anakin's voice crackled over the link. *"Tahiri and I are kind of being held up by some very determined reporters."*
"Do you need any help?"
"No, not really," Anakin sounded hesitant.
"Anakin?"
"It's okay. We just decided to give an interview and make them all go away. We'll meet up with Ganner and Lowie back at the Trickster, so go ahead and take off."

"You sure now?"
"Absolutely, positively….not at all. If this backfires, the Jedi Order's going to have to look for a new poster child."
"Did you at least talk to someone else about this plan?"
"He did," Tahiri sounded extremely disgruntled. *"Is it a genetic thing that makes Anakin come up with these ridiculous ideas?"*
"He gets it from his mom," Han said dryly. "And don't tell her I said that. Anyway, if you two are positive that you can make it out on the *Trickster*, Jagged's Clawcrafts and the *Falcon* will wait for you at the jump point."
"This shouldn't take long." Anakin replied in affirmative.
Han sighed, shook his head, and flipped the switch that caused the boarding ramp to rise. He supposed having a couple days of peace and quiet was the most the galaxy was going to give him. Then again, how much trouble could Anakin get into in a single interview?
"Dad!" Jaina's voice jolted Han from his thoughts.
"I don't want to know!" Han yelled back.
"It's Anakin, he's on the HoloNet!"
"I said I didn't want to know!"
| **|**
"This is Pal'iva Konat with the Galactic Star. I am here with the famous, or infamous depending on who you ask, Jedi, Anakin Solo, who has agreed to give an exclusive interview. Something you will only see on HoloNet channel Ezona-Five. Anakin Solo, I'd like to thank you for this opportunity, I know that you are a busy young man. I will try to keep this as brief as possible."
"I appreciate that."
"Anakin, though the Queen Mother has pardoned you for your participation in the events at Fondor, there are many Hapans who view this as undisguised nepotism. It is well known that the Queen Mother is friends with both your brother and sister and in addition to that, all of you are Jedi. What do you have to say to those who believe the sentence should have been carried out?"
"First of all, I'd like to express my condolences to all those who lost their lives at Fondor. It was a terrible accident that was created due to factors outside of my control. I do not deny that my presence on Centerpoint was the catalyst for the disaster that followed. But what those who doubt the Queen Mother's judgment should be asking is, why me, who was fifteen years old at the time, was put in that situation in the first place? Had the war truly reached a point where the galaxy had to rely on a fifteen year old to fight for them? Keep in mind, this was a full year and a half before Coruscant fell."

"So you are saying that the destruction of the Hapan Fleet at Fondor is the fault of the New Republic and Master Skywalker?"
"Tell me, Ms. Konat. Would *you* have entrusted such a powerful weapon in the hands of a teenager?"
"It's why I'm glad I'm just a reporter."
"Both the New Republic and Jedi Order have been growing increasingly desperate for someone to win this war for them. They tried to make that someone me. Some *still* look to me to win this war. Others have already thrown in the towel, saying we shouldn't provoke the Yuuzhan Vong any further. Then, there are factions like the Peace Brigade and their allies. They believe that all they have to do is turn over all the Jedi and the war will be over. Some of the very people we're trying to protect blame the war on us. So tell me, how is one teenager expected to act when his allies pressure him to succeed and the very people he is trying to protect would just as sooner turn him over to the Yuuzhan Vong?"
"Anakin, why do *you* think so many people are against the Jedi if, as you say, the Jedi are trying to protect the public? Why, then, are the numbers of the Peace Brigade growing by the day? Do you think they might have a point? After all, if the Jedi are doing their job, as you say they are, why then did Coruscant fall? Why then are there so many refugees? And why, whenever a Jedi arrives on planet, does a Yuuzhan Vong fleet arrive soon after to raze it?"
"That's due to a combination of two primary factors. To simplify things, fear has a large role to play in this relationship. The people fear the Yuuzhan Vong, so they try to offer the Jedi to appease them. They also, to some extent, fear the Jedi. They don't know the Jedi so it's better to get rid of one fear to appease the other. What they fail to realize is that the Yuuzhan Vong have conquered ever planet afterwards, even if the Jedi had been handed over. The Yuuzhan Vong will destroy any inorganic technology. Those who use even a datapad are considered to be*infidels* in their eyes. Handing over Jedi will not stop the Yuuzhan Vong from doing as they please, yet the Jedi are easy targets because we are few in number and because our leaders are weak. Which brings me to the second factor. The reason why the Jedi have been vilified, hunted down, and scattered, is because Master Skywalker is a weak leader. Don't get me wrong, he is a good teacher, but he is *not* a good wartime leader for the Jedi."
"And you would be?"
Anakin smiled lopsidedly. "I'd be an even worse leader. Even though Master Skywalker is trying to form a council of Jedi Masters to help lead us, he does so very late in the war; almost at a point where such a

council would be pointless. The Jedi Order is already greatly fractured along ideological lines. You heard two of the dynamically opposing views presented at my trial by Alema Rar and Ganner Rhysode. Forming a council might be the only thing that will keep that fracture from becoming permanent. But, there is one big problem with Master Skywalker's idea."
"A problem?"
"Yes, any council he creates cannot be composed of only Jedi, as it was in the Old Republic. Even if the New Republic government reforms and insists on a role in this council, there is still no connection between the Jedi and the people they protect. It is because the Jedi Order is considered so secretive that people barely know anything about us. This ignorance leads to fear; which in turn, leads to hatred. At the outbreak of this war, had people known more about the Jedi, about our families, our contributions to this galaxy, they might not have been in such a hurry to turn us over to the Yuuzhan Vong. Even our own government wasn't sure what to do with us. Not that we can blame them, we didn't know what to do with ourselves either. Of course, you can make the usual comments about hind-sight. But it was at that time, the very beginning, that Master Skywalker should have begun sharing to the galaxy what being a Jedi truly is about. Should have actually taken charge and given the Order direction instead of waffle around and wax philosophical with those who disagreed with his decisions. We are few in number, can pull of feats most can't, but we need the support of the people of this galaxy if we want to play a role in protecting them. You can't protect those who don't want to be protected, and you can't make friends if you keep yourself and your actions a secret. Nor can you expect the government to protect you if you don't even know what or how you can contribute in this war."
"So, Anakin Solo, if you were in charge of the Jedi Order of the here-and-now, what would you do to gain the public's trust?"
"I would develop relations with the media," Anakin said. "Then spread the story of each and every Jedi who has fallen during this war. What their family was like, why they died, and most importantly, who, if any, died with them. I would open the council to outside observers, or maybe stream the sessions on the HoloNet, so the people can learn about the issues we face. I would recall each and every Jedi who can return, so that their viewpoints can be heard. So that the people can see just how diverse the Order is. So the Order can look at itself and see what it has become, recognize that it has grown beyond a simple school, a place for wayward Force users. The Jedi are not immune from the same fear that has swept the galaxy, we're still living beings just

like all of you. Perhaps, once we overcome the differences that exist within the Jedi Order itself, we can also bridge the gap between the rest of the population of the galaxy."
"Thank you very much, Anakin Solo. And there you have it, the first exclusive interview given by Anakin Solo since his pardon by the new Hapan Queen Mother, Tenel Ka Djo. The galaxy may be falling apart, but we'd still like to hear your views. Is he a hopeless dreamer, crazed murderer, hero of the Republic? So I want all those listening out there to chime in. Until next time, this is Pal'iva Konat of the Galactic Star."
❙ **❙**
"I wonder how many heads are exploding now," Kyle Katarn said glibly, watching the HoloNet broadcast. He was reclining in the passenger chair of the *Raven's Claw,* an aging but still useful shuttle from which he had launched many of his missions from, with his fingers linked behind his head.
His longtime partner in crime and the ship's pilot, Jan Ors, smiled and shook her head wryly. "A whole bunch, probably. You Jedi types definitely leave an impression."
"I can't see Master Skywalker or *any* of the other masters taking this well." The *Raven's Claw*'s third passenger, and occupant of the co-pilot's chair, Jaden Korr, added. "Anakin really should have picked a better time. Questioning the leaders when we're at war is never a good time to air out dirty laundry."
"You have to admit, though," Kyle replied. "The kid does make a few points. Half the reason why I don't regularly report to Master Skywalker is because of the way he runs things. Heck, he probably has more Jedi operating on the fringes of the Order than he does in the Order itself."
"But there wouldn't be an Order, if it weren't for him," Jaden pointed out.
"True. Hey Jan. You're not a Force user. What's your opinion?"
"Oh, no. Leave me out of it," Jan said, her pony-tail swishing as she turned to look over her shoulder. "Besides, I wouldn't be the most impartial judge anyways. I've had to look after your hairy butt for a couple decades."
"Come on, Jan," Jaden said. "You must have some thought about Anakin's little show."
"Fine. But only because *you* asked, Korr." Jan smiled as she went back to piloting their ship. They were currently in a refugee convoy heading away from Coruscant. Officially, they were helping the New Republic and supplying extra security. Unofficially, they were on their way to Borleias to meet up with Wraith Squadron. "What viewpoint do you

want? A layman's understanding, a military view, or from an intelligence's perspective?"
"Master Katarn would probably glare at me if I said anything other than 'all three'."
"Your senses serve you well, my apprentice," Kyle replied deadpan. "And how many times do I have to tell you to just call me 'Kyle'?"
"You know, the next time New Republic Intel wants me to babysit the two of you at the same time for a mission, remind me to refuse."
"Think of all the fun times we've had together," Kyle said, leaning forward to shut off the HoloNet transmission. "You'd miss out on more of those heart-pounding adventures."
"Nearly getting killed a dozen times over is not something us non-Force users look forward to, Jedi Master Katarn," Jan shot back. "If we do die, we don't have the luxury of coming back as Force ghosts and haunting those that got us killed. Anyway, to answer your apprentice's question. To a layman, such as the majority of the non-military, non-Jedi hating fraction of the galaxy, Anakin's statements would be both controversial but also a departure from how they normally see the Jedi. Whether they take him seriously or not is another thing. Both of you have already voiced the military view, that Anakin shouldn't be questioning the leadership in a time of war. But then, again, there will be those who agree with him. From an intelligence perspective, Anakin is continuing the gamble he started during his trial. If he loses, only he will suffer, but if he wins, he'll bring the Jedi Order together in a way that hasn't yet been seen."
"That's a good thing, right?" Jaden said.
Jan shrugged. "Depends."
"On what?" Kyle folded his arms in front of him.
"On how you Jedi Masters respond. You'll either pull together against him or pull together around him. That is, of course, unless his gamble completely fails and he ends up splintering the Order more than it already is."
"*That* would take a lot more talent than I think he has," Kyle commented. An alarm began to blink on his control panel and he frowned. "Looks like Intel was right again. Someone *is* tracking these refugee convoys."
"This is the third convoy so far," Jaden pulled the safety harness off him. "I didn't pick up any outgoing transmissions, so it's not an inside job."
"Doesn't really matter now, boys," Jan sent the *Raven's Claw* into a high trajectory out and over the convoy. "We have Yuuzhan Vong. A frigate, half a squadron of coralskippers, and two slave-transports."

"Some welcome party."
Jan hit the comm-system. "Corscanti Convoy Gamma-four, this is your escort speaking. Break hard to port and we'll try to cover."
"Much appreciated, Raven's Claw. Convoy Lead out."
"We're one supped up shuttle and five Z-95 Headhunters," Kyle pointed out, moving into the co-pilot's chair that Jaden just evacuated. "You have a plan?"
"Just think of this as one of the fun times you mentioned earlier."
"Oh, when we were out-gunned, out-numbered, and had to rely on your sharp mind and my blazing wit?"
"Naturally."
"This is Escort Lead," Jaden's voice came over the comm-system. *"I'm good to go."*
"You are clear to detach," Jan replied. Jaden's Headhunter, clamped to the underside of the *Raven's Claw*, released its magnetic clamps and veered off.
"Escort Lead is clear. Escorts Two through Five check in." As the other Headhunters protecting the convoy replied, they formed up around the *Raven's Claw. "So, Kyle, any plan that doesn't end in our inevitable death?"*
"Jan's the brains of this operation."
"Kyle, isn't she the brains of <u>all</u> your operations?"
"Ha ha, Korr," Kyle said dryly. "Jan, could you be so kind as to inform my *apprentice* of our plans?"
"Escort Flight, stay back and concentrate on the fighters. Fire your warheads only if you are certain of a kill. The *Raven's Claw* will handle the frigate."
"Roger that."
Jan flipped another switch for an open broadcast. "This is the *Raven's Claw* to any New Republic ship in the region. I am personally escorting a Jedi Master in a convoy of refugees and have come under attack from the Vong. Request immediate help."
Kyle frowned. "There are no New Republic ships nearby."
"I know that, but the scar-heads don't," Jan pointed to the approaching coralskippers. Though the alien fighters had been on course for the Headhunter flight, Jan's transmission seemed to have gotten their attention. They now had a half a dozen coralskippers bearing down on them. Even the commander of the frigate seemed to view the *Raven's Claw* as more important than the rest of the convoy and moved his vessel to intercept.
"Great, everyone is going to be shooting at us. This is definitely like old times."

"Let's just hope this old girl can pull through for us," Jan patted the steering column fondly.
"She hasn't let me down yet," Kyle quipped. "So, about that marriage proposal…"
"I've already told you before Kyle," Jan sighed, sending the ship into a roll to avoid several long distance pot-shots. "Our luck's going to run out some time. I'm not going to marry you only to have one of us die the next day. Unless you've forgotten, we're going to Coruscant in less than a month. Not the best place for a honeymoon."
"And you're supposed to be the optimistic one of our relationship."
"The word you want is 'realistic,'" Jan pointed out. "*You're* the optimistic one. Besides, do you really think we're the type of people to settle down and become moisture farmers somewhere?"
"There's nothing wrong with that, is there? My dad was one." A coralskipper that had been lining up for an attack one received a one-two punch that tore apart its cockpit. Jaden's lasers activated the void defenses, and a split second later, a missile ripped through before the voids could reactivate.
"Doesn't matter how many times you ask, Kyle," Jan replied with a slight smile. "I'm always going to say 'no'."
"I'll just keep asking then," Kyle fired the *Raven's Claw*'s lasers a winged another coralskipper, and the Headhunter flight finished it off. "I'm bound to get lucky someday."
"And here I thought you Jedi didn't believe in luck." Another coralskipper flared up in front of them. By then, however, the frigate moved into position and began firing.
"*Most* Jedi don't."
"You should join them." Jan and Kyle were shaken in their seats as a missile exploded just behind the *Raven's Claw*.
"Bring us around, towards the frigate," Kyle said.
"I hope you know what you're doing."
"Trying to see if I'm as lucky as I think I am."
"I *really* hope you know what you're doing."
"Master Skywalker tried this little trick on a Yuuzhan Vong ship once. He nearly passed out afterwards, but it solved his Vong problem." Kyle synced up the laser system. "He inverted one of those mini-black holes they use as their shield. Sucked the ship right up."
"And you've done this before?"
"You know I only do crazy ideas once." Kyle said, closing his eyes and reaching out with the Force.
Though he couldn't sense the Yuuzhan Vong, he *could* sense where the Force wasn't. And as they barreled towards the firing frigate, he fired

the lasers. He could feel the energy of the heated beams of light flash through the vacuum of space. See the voids activate as the frigate's defenses flared to absorb the lethal energy. And just as the lasers entered the void, bending ever so slowly, he reached out with the Force and began to muster his strength against the singularity. He continued to fire, forcing the voids to stay up. All the while, he pushed on the singularity with every ounce of strength he had. As he did, ever bone in his body began to ache, his mind exploding with a throbbing migraine.

Kyle knew that he wasn't as strong in the Force as Master Skywalker was. If using this technique had rendered the Grand Master nauseous, Kyle wasn't exactly looking forward to the consequences. Still, he continued to gradually apply pressure to the defense void. Slowly, ever so slowly, it began to move back into the yorik-coral of the frigate. Pieces began to peel off, compressed and snapping under the pull of the void. It was minor damage at first, then the entire aft of the frigate shattered and was pulled into the void.

The rest of the frigate quickly followed, completely obliterated in less than a minute. Not that Kyle was conscious of the fact. Nevertheless, the moment the frigate was vanquished, the two Yuuzhan Vong slave-ships quickly jumped to hyperspace. The remaining coralskippers, though they managed to destroy two of the escort Headhunters, were annihilated to the last warrior.

Jan, glancing worriedly at her co-pilot, activated the comm-system once more. "Escort Lead, this is Jan. Jaden can you get your butt back onboard? Kyle did something and he's out cold."

"*I know, I felt him lose consciousness. He's alright as far as I can tell, just completely drained. I don't think he'll wake any time soon."*

"And the man wonders why I don't want to marry him." Jan mumbled to herself. She reactivated the com. "Come on back anyways. Once we drop off our convoy, we're headed to Borleias. I just hope Kyle will recover in time for the mission."

"*It's just a trip behind enemy lines, onto an enemy held planet. We've done worse."*

"You know, that line is right up there with 'what could possibly go wrong.'"

"*You said it, not me.*"

Jan shook her head ruefully. "Just come back. We still have a couple of days before Borleias anyways, and something tells me you'll be better at making conversation than my current co-pilot."

I **I**

Green eyes, soft and glimmering with intelligence, stared up at the blinking stars. Night had fallen on Ord Mirit, the staging ground for General Wedge Antilles' Borleias invasion fleet. Danni Quee, a Force-sensitive from Commenor, absently reached a hand up towards the sparkling jewels as a soft wind fluttered through her long blond hair. She appreciated these rare moments of peace. Though it was currently dark, there was no better time to see the beauty of the galaxy displayed above her.

She could use the Force, but she was no warrior or pilot. Instead, since her capture by the Yuuzhan Vong, she had devoted herself to learning as much as she could about them. Life, both in this galaxy and the galaxy of the Yuuzhan Vong, fascinated her. She marveled at the similarities and differences. Took great joy in learning how something worked. The Force was life, and yet the Yuuzhan Vong were outside of the Force; at least, according to the rest of the Jedi. Danni still held out hope that someone would create that ultimate connection between the Yuuzhan Vong and the Force. She knew that the Yuuzhan Vong were every bit as alive as she or the next person was. Most of this galaxy just couldn't understand them, were too afraid to understand them. With the vast expanse of the galaxy above her, Danni absently reached out towards the stars.

General Antilles' lightning strike on Ord Mirit had meant that the Yuuzhan Vong garrison hadn't even had a chance to get off a warning. Danni had spent the better part of the afternoon helping scientists catalogue and Yuuzhan Vong technology, as well as identify the domain markings of the few warriors who had been on station. She had been given leave once her task had been done. Rather than join the others in the make-shift mess area or retire for the night, Danni had ventured out of the forward command base.

It was times like this that allowed her to reflect on everything she had been through. The friends and acquaintances who had come and gone. She reflexively reached into her jumpsuit pocket to finger a single metallic disc. A gift from yet another Jedi who had died protecting her, died so that she could live. Images flashed through her mind. She could clearly see dark, long hair, wavy behind broad shoulders. A rugged and tired face that still held a hint of kindness despite everything.

Jorallen.

Danni's mouth moved, but she did not say his name aloud. Both she and Jorallen had been tracking the disappearance of several Jedi shortly before Anakin's mission to Myrkr. They had known that the Yuuzhan Vong were behind the missing Jedi, but what they didn't

expect was what the Vong had been using the Jedi for. The High Priestess who had been behind the abductions had turned out to be Force-Sensitive as well. Well, artificially Force-Sensitive. The Priestess had carried out experimentations and grafted brain tissue from captive Jedi onto her own brain. The remaining missing Jedi had suffered a fate far worse than death; their essences drained, their spirits absorbed by the Priestess to enhance her own abilities.

When she and Jorallen finally met the Priestess face-to-face, they had been caught wholly off guard. Had Jorallen not sacrificed himself, they might have even joined the other unfortunate Jedi. The Priestess had tried to absorb his Force presence but he violently detached his spirit from his body. This caused an explosive backlash that destroyed them both. All that was left of the Yuuzhan Vong was a shriveled husk, while Jorallen's body had disappeared completely. The only thing Danni had left of him was a single metal disc which contained a painted image of Jorallen's little sister.

After the Priestess had died, Danni had somehow managed to smuggle herself off the Vong-occupied world and sought out the little girl. Just as Jorallen had told her, his sister was Force-sensitive as well. Now the girl was with the other Force-sensitive children, learning the ways of the Force, determined to become a Jedi like her big brother.

As for herself, well, Danni had attached herself to the next task force assigned to fight the Yuuzhan Vong. Tried to bury herself in her work so the faces and names, ghosts of her past, did not wear her down. Miko Reglia and Jorallen, two names forever carved into her mind. There was one other name that stayed with her, however, and this name did not cause her as much anguish. Jacen Solo. The one who had rescued her when she had been captured at the beginning of the Yuuzhan Vong invasion. A brown-haired young man with a pacifistic, easy-going outlook on life. Despite the fact that she wasn't trained in the Force, she could somehow feel the distance between the two of them shrink, as if he were nearing Ord Mirit. She knew that the Solos had captured a Yuuzhan Vong frigate, and tried to convince herself that that was the reason why she was excited for Jacen's approach. It was not every day one got a chance to personally study a Yuuzhan Vong ship of that size.

But even as she mentally chastised herself, she could not shake the warm feeling his presence invoked. They had not known each other for long, nor had they even talked in recent times, but his rescuing of her had created a bond between the two of them. Whether it was because both respected every living creature, Yuuzhan Vong or no, or their

mutually compatible views of the Force, Danni couldn't deny the attraction she felt for the other.
She sighed and sat up, brushing the dirt from the back of her jumpsuit. Thinking too much was sometimes a bad thing. Shaking her head to free any debris from her long, blond hair, Danni reached into the pack she had brought with her and pulled out an infant dovin basal. If she couldn't sleep, couldn't relax, she might as well continue her studies. There would be plenty of time to ponder her non-existent relationship with Jacen when he arrived. And, if going by her abilities as a fledgling Jedi, she was pretty sure he would arrive soon.
I **I**
Wedge Antilles, hero of the Republic, hero of the Adumari Union, slayer of a Death Star, first-fighter-pilot-to-wear-an-Ewok-puppet-into-battle, he held so many titles, some welcomed, others not so much, that he sometimes wondered what had possessed him to return to the fleet. The last thing he wanted was another title. As it was, he was extremely close to taking up Jansen's idea, making it so that *all* of his titles were recited whenever he was announced at New Republic functions. That'd make sure the higher-ups kept him retired.
Maybe he should have retired on Adumar. With all his titles, he'd instantly be made supreme leader of the planet.
As thoughts of his second retirement swirled in his mind, Wedge held a holo of his family. In it, a smiling but exhausted Iella held their second daughter, Myri, while Syal, their first daughter, looked on. Seven years never seemed longer to the aged hero.
Hair streaked with grey, heavy bags under his eyes, Wedge could only pray that Iella had gotten herself and their children off of Coruscant.
His door chimed, and Wedge placed the picture down and forced his feelings aside. Worrying over them wasn't going to keep the countless men and women under his command alive.
"Come in."
The doors opened to reveal a similar ex-retiree and his XO, Tycho Celchu. "All material and supplies accounted for, Wedge. We've also received a gift."
"Gift?"
"Lando and Tendra Calrissian just arrived. They're offering their services and a transport full of YVH-1s."
Wedge raised an eyebrow. "A 'transport full.'"
"According to Lando, and I quote, 'the *Record Time* has enough droids in it to give even the Supreme Overlord an apoplexy. Two questions: Where do you want them? And if I donate them, are they considered tax deductible?'"

"Do you think he'd appreciate it if we gave him his old commission back?"
"Do *you* like having your old commission back?"
"Good point. His droids can help with the ground assault, it would be wrong to punish him. Does he have any room for another dozen or so of our people? The *Dire Straits* is still down, we're probably going to have to cannibalize it and we need to put those troops somewhere."
"I'll ask him."
"Anything else?"
"Booster says that the *Errant Venture* is currently out of commission. The Skywalkers will also be arriving late onboard the *Falcon.* Lastly, our contacts in the Imperial side of things also say that we're on our own."
"Not like it was unexpected."
"Yes. On the bright side, our scouts also just got back from the Pyria system and report minimal defenses. We should have no problem in space, but planet-wise the geography might prove challenging."
"Borleias has a jungle if I recall."
"A very thick one. Even if we conduct a lightning strike, it's highly likely that some of the Yuuzhan Vong will be on patrol."
"We'll have to deal with them later. Do we have any estimates as to how long it will take for the Vong to send reinforcements?"
"Several days at most. Latest intel suggests that after the loss at Hapes, they've decided to consolidate their hold on Coruscant."
"Plenty of time to make a break for the next Vong-occupied planet."
"My thoughts exactly."
"Okay, good. Have everyone take a couple of hours of leave to catch up on their sleep. There's no telling when we'll get another opportunity to do so after Borleias. After that, make sure the fleet is ready to move out."
"Then, as per your orders Wedge, turn off that lamp and sleep. We need our leaders well-rested as well."
Wedge rubbed his face tiredly and his eyes darted to the picture of his family once more. "I will. Let me just finish off these last couple of reports."
"Any sign of Iella and the kids?" Tycho asked gently.
Wedge shook his head. "No. But she'll have gotten them out. Now shoo, if you want me to sleep, I need some space to finish up. Who ever knew that taking Borleias a second time would be a lot more headache-inducing than before?"
"Serves us right for joining the Fleet instead of Starfighter command. What were you thinking?"

"We're too old for those fighters. My back gets stiff just thinking about those seats."
"We're too old to be doing this at all."
| **|**
High Priest Naazar, mouth of Yun-Yammka and overseer of the Will of Yun-Yammka braved the stares of the others as he approached the Supreme Overlord.
"First Yun-Harla turns her back on us, and now the might of Yun-Yammka fails us." The Overlord said, his voice deep and low.
Supreme Overlord Shimrra's most trusted advisor, the misshapen Onimi, chortled at his side. "Oh failed us they did. Where is Naazar? Where is Harrar? Disgraced and dead. The blood of their warriors running red!"
"Silence, Onimi!" The Overlord barked. Onimi bowed his head and melted back into the shadows. "It is clear that we are coming to an end of the knowledge supplied to us by the seventh cortex. Jacen Solo's sabotage of the World Brain has slowed its growth, but still, the gods are creating the eighth cortex for all Yuuzhan Vong. Once the gods see fit to reveal their secrets, we will act accordingly."
"And what of High Priest Naazar!" A voice called out. Naazar snarled inwardly, it was the voice of one of the other myriad of priests who would stand to benefit from his downfall. "You cannot deny the words of Onimi, wretched thing that he is. Naazar commanded a fleet that greatly outnumbered those of the infidels. He commanded the *Khattazz'Yammka*, second only to your dreaded bodyguards. Yet he returns, his fleet intact, but missing the most sacred of our vessels. He returns, but the strength of the *Khattazz'Yammka* is no more. It is clear that Naazar no longer has the favor of the gods!"
"We all saw what happened with Harrar when Yun-Harla turned her gaze away from him," shouted another in agreement. "Shall we wait until an even greater disaster befalls us?"
Shimrra rose from his throne of yorik-coral, draped in the skin of his predecessor. "I am the Supreme Overlord here, not you! I did not see you, or any of the others, volunteer to retrieve the *Jeedai.* Nor did I see you spill your blood upon Myrkr, Hapes, or even on this planet, Yuuzhan'tar! If the gods wish to punish Naazar, they shall do so on their own time, not yours. Just as they dealt with Harrar, so too shall they deal with Naazar if it is their desire. I will hear no more of your yapping!" He took a moment to compose himself. "Now, I will hear from the head of the shapers. Tell us all, what is the progress of the eighth cortex?"

A shaper with many modifications stepped forward and bowed lowly. "Supreme Overlord, the cortex continues to grow despite the damage inflicted to the World Brain by the *Jeedai*. This is a clear sign that we still hold the favor of the gods. I estimate that by the time Yuuzhan'tar has completed its annual revolution, the cortex will be ready for you."
Shimrra nodded royally and turned back to the gathered crowd of priests and warriors. "Very well. As the shapers have decreed. The gods are still with us, and thus we have their blessing to continue this war."
"My lord," Naazar finally spoke up. "If you were to rearm my fleet, I guarantee Yun-Yammka will not…"
"No, Naazar, I have another task for you."
"My lord?"
"I have been hearing many distasteful and blasphemous rumors circulating among the Shamed Ones. Talk of the *Jeedai* as being the rightful avatars of the gods. Nom Anor has informed me that you would be best suited in stopping these rumors in their tracks. Bring me the leaders and we will have them confess their heresy before all."
Naazar couldn't help but glare at Nom Anor, who was standing silently at the exit. Not only did the crafty Intendant caste member strip him of his fleet, he had also removed him from the front lines. If only he could bleed Nom Anor out in front of everyone. Despite the tempest burning in his eyes, Naazar bowed his head obediently. "I live to serve you, the mouthpiece of the gods, Supreme One."
Receiving a nod of dismissal, Naazar spun around and headed towards the exit. He stopped only briefly at Nom Anor, eyes narrowed dangerously. "There will come a time when the gods will no longer favor you. At that time, you will regret having made an enemy of me."
Nom Anor smiled twistedly and leaned forward, his stale breath against Naazar's ear. "That time will never come. For if it does, then there are no such things as the gods."
"You dare?"
"Dare? I am merely pointing out the ridiculousness of your threat. The Supreme Overlord has my ear, he has his eighth cortex. You, however, have failed the Yuuzhan Vong and have been confined to Yuuzhan'tar. Tell me then, just how am I supposed to fear you, *High Priest* Naazar? Now if you will excuse me, I have to inform the Overlord about an infidel fleet massing near the Pyria system."
Naazar seethed in silence as Nom Anor stepped away, dismissing him as if he was a Shamed One. Yet, there was little he could do. To defy the Overlord would be to defy the gods themselves. Perhaps Yun-Yammka wished him to learn something from his demotion. Or

perhaps…Naazar ended the heretical thought before it could take root. For now, he would have to bide his time.
He left the chamber with as much dignity as he could. Summoning his aides, he prepared to go to a different type of war. Though the Shamed Ones were nothing in the eyes of the gods, they needed to be reminded of their position every so often. That was the task he had been assigned, so that was the task he would do. For the glory of Yuuzhan-tar.
I **I**
Despite the plans and intrigue being carried out on both the Yuuzhan Vong and New Republic sides of the war, shadows moved in the background, shaping a time that was many years yet to come. Unbeknownst to the occupants of the *Millennium Falcon*, a single transmission was being broadcasted far into space. On the receiving end was an asteroid. Not just any asteroid, however, but one hollowed out and turned into a base. A very well hidden base, since detection was the last thing its occupant wanted. A lone figure sat in the shadows, listening and responding to the voice-only hypercomm transmission.
"What is your opinion of the Solo boy?"
"Which one?"
"You still have time to play such games?"
"Do we not have nothing but time? The war with the Yuuzhan Vong is nearing its zenith."
"Then you agree? Either will be suitable?"
"Jacen remains the best candidate. Especially after our time on Coruscant, as short as it was."
"But what of Anakin Solo?"
"He too remains a viable candidate. There is a reason why the Jedi of old frowned upon… romantic…attachments."
"You favor both, yet only one can return the Sith to power."
"The stronger of the two shall be that one."
"To set brothers against each other?"
"It would not be the first time."
"It will be a difficult task, though Jacen will be easier to turn."
"Any Jedi can be turned given the right circumstances."
"And Jacen's sacrifice?"
"I do not believe the Hapans would miss their new Queen Mother. The red-headed Jedi has the potential to upset our plans."
"And the sacrifice for Anakin Solo?"
"Must I do all the work? I will continue to teach Jacen. I will leave his brother to you."

"I look forward to seeing the return of the Sith, though a long ways off it may be."
"A real Sith Lord. Most Sith and Jedi are the same, foolish practitioners of arts they do not truly understand."
"Yet, when we are done with Anakin and Jacen, their education will be complete."
"And the galaxy will tremble at the force we will unleash upon it."
I **I**
Elsewhere, on a desolate graveyard of a planet, where the atmosphere was imbued with despair and rage, a slumbering force opened his eyes.
IChapter End**I**
A/N: I'm setting up the story to go in the Legacy direction, since there will be a sequel. Legacy undertones will continue throughout this story with a complicating twist occurring in Destiny's Way. As always, thanks to all who review, I appreciate the time you all take to tell me what you think of the story.
21/7/12- minor edits.